The Half-Life of Element Zero

by GraphiteGirl

Summary

After her discharge from the Alliance, Commander Helen Trevelyan joined the Andromeda Initiative, wanting to leave her personal tragedies and a psycho ex-boyfriend behind her. She expected to sleep for 600 years, and wake up in a med bay. Instead, she crash-landed on a snow-covered mountain, ten-thousand years later. She is alone, confused, and dying from eezo radiation. And the only sign of civilization is an old church in the distance.
A Post-Modern Girl on Thedas fic.

Many, many thanks to my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen, who have advised me on all matters of lore, plausibility and verb tense. If it wasn't for them, this story would still be in cryo. Any mistakes are mine, not theirs.

I have a regular work schedule IRL, which means I don't have a regular update schedule on AO3. This story is visually supported.

I sometimes tumblr at https://unhealthynpcobsession.tumblr.com/

Bioware owns all/legal boilerplate/blah blah blah.
Chapter one
Chapter one

Looking back, Helen realized that the first warning sign had appeared on the third date.

The first two dates had been fine. More than fine. Clinton was funny, charming, and easy on the eyes. He was a great storyteller. He owned a software company that wrote tech programs for omnitools.

That was how they'd met. Helen was part of the first wave of L3 biotics in the Alliance. After she'd paid her dues with several tours of duty, Helen had been transferred to Vancouver to research biotic wetware. Clinton's company had been hired to adapt omnitool programs for biotic soldiers. Helen had been part of a test group of Marines to put the new programs through their paces.

Helen was not used to attention from men, especially not men with black hair, olive-green eyes, dimples and perfect teeth.

She’d had few relationships. She was very short, with pale skin and an unremarkable figure. Her mouth was too wide for her face. She'd gone prematurely gray in high school, not long after her biotics came in. Her eyes were a muddy, slate color. She was no great beauty.
Or so she'd been told by the few boyfriends she'd had. Granted, that conversation tended to happen after they'd seen her biotics in action, but she saw herself in the mirror every day. She saw no reason to disbelieve them.

So when Clinton asked her out, of course, she'd said yes.

And on that third date, they spoke about his previous relationship. He told her it had ended because his girlfriend cheated on him. “I'm a big believer in full disclosure,” he said. “It takes a lot to earn my trust. It can take even more to keep it.”

Helen reached across the table for his hand. She wasn't exactly sure what he meant but oh, how she wanted him to trust her.

Clinton looked at their clasped hands. Then, without lifting his head at all, he raised his eyes to hers, so that he was looking at her from underneath his long, dark eyelashes and goodness, it had made her heart flutter.

“I want to trust you, Helen. Can I?” he pleaded. “Can I trust you?”

“Of course you can,” Helen breathed. “Whatever it takes.” And Lord help her, she meant it.

He kissed for the first time that night. And if he wasn't as good a kisser as she'd hoped, it hardly mattered when he looked as good as he did.

They had sex after the sixth date. They were fooling around on his sofa. Things were getting pretty hot when Clinton reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom.

“Oh,” Helen said, surprised. “I, um, wasn't planning to do that quite yet.”

Clinton's face turned hard. He scowled down at her. “Are...are you fucking serious? What is this, some kind of cock-tease, power play bullshit?”

Helen propped herself up on her elbows. “What?” she said, deeply confused by his reaction. “No, I'm just not sure I'm ready. I mean, I want to eventually, but we haven't—”

“No, you're just like all the others,” he pushed himself off of her. “You said I could trust you, but you didn't mean it.”

Helen found the next thirty minutes very, very confusing. Clinton made all kinds of outrageous accusations against her. She was trying to manipulate him. She was trying to control him. She wanted to fuck other guys. She was fucking other guys.

She spent the argument mostly reeling from one accusation to the next. None of her denials seemed to matter. And mostly, none of his anger made any sense to her.

But when he called her a whore, she'd had enough. “Yeah. We're done,” she said.

Clinton panicked as she'd headed towards the front door. “Oh my god, Helen, oh my god, I'm so sorry. Please, don't leave. Please!!”

He begged her to stay. Begged. He even wept, as he tearfully explained that he was so sorry, that he didn't mean to lose his temper like that, but he'd just fallen so in love with her, and she was so beautiful, and he couldn't handle the idea of her leaving him, because he really, really loved her and he did trust her, really, and just, she was his everything. And on and on.
Helen got so swept up in it all. Nobody had ever told her they'd loved her before, not romantically, anyway. No man had ever wept over her or begged her to stay. Making up with Clinton, and having sex just...kind of happened.

As the relationship progressed, more warning signs appeared. First, he pressured her to move in with him.

“I can't, Clinton. You know I have to live on base. It's required.”

“If this were something you really wanted, you'd at least be willing to ask for an exception.”

“There aren't any exceptions.”

“But you haven't even asked,” he said. And it went on like that for weeks.

Then, just when she thought that issue was resolved, she started missing messages and communications from her family. Her parents lived on Eden Prime, and she spoke to them at least a couple of times every week, and often more. When a few weeks had gone by without hearing from them, she called.

Nearly the first words out of her mother's mouth were, “Sweetie, why haven't you called? Is everything alright?”

"What do you mean?” Helen asked. “I hadn't heard from you in a couple of weeks, so I was calling you.”

It didn't take long to realize that the reason none of her parent's calls had gotten through was that their ID had been blocked and that the increasingly frantic messages they had been leaving were getting automatically deleted.

Helen had recently updated the security software on her omnitool, so she wrote it off as her not paying attention to her settings. Granted, that was unusual for her. Helen may have been an adept by training, but she researched wetware in no small part because of her intuitive grasp of tech. Still, it just seemed like a coincidence. She changed the settings and forgot about it.

Then Clinton slowly but surely turned their dates into interrogations. How had she spent her day? Who was she spending it with? Why hadn't she called him back right away?

A lot of what she did was classified, which Clinton well knew. But even if she'd worked as a cashier in a convenience store, she would have pushed back on this. She'd grown up on a farm, she busted her ass every day, and her job was her own damn business.

Much like the argument over living together, Clinton took far too long to accept the truth.

“How do I know you're aren't fucking around on me?” he demanded one night after he'd ruined yet another date by picking a fight as soon as they got back to his apartment.

“You don't, Clinton,” she said. “It's called trust. And I'm tired of trying to prove a negative.”

She left that night and didn't talk to him for a week. She thought about how toxic things had become, how controlling he was getting. She thought of all of the arguments and ruined evenings.

Then he called and apologized. “I appreciate that Clinton, I do,” she said. “But I think it's best we call things off.”
Clinton had sobbed, begged, and badgered. Please, no she couldn't leave him. He could change his behavior. If she could just talk to him one more time, so that he could clear the air, that's all he would ask. If, after that, she still wanted to end things, he'd leave her alone forever. Promise.

Against her better judgment, she met him for dinner.

He had gone out of his way to give her the full-charm offensive, taking extra care with his appearance, and being so careful with his tone. He spent half the night looking up at her through his eyelashes like she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

It had nearly worked, too, damn him and his pretty green eyes. She was considering that maybe she should give them another chance when Clinton let slip something that he should have never known.

Two days earlier, Lieutenant Katarina Kowalsky, an L2 biotic in Helen's research unit, had had a seizure. She and Helen had been training with the new software when it happened. Helen had written up the incident report, and sent it to their CO and the infirmary. Nothing earth shattering but highly classified, as was nearly everything having to do with the health of the L2s.

At dinner, Clinton was talking about the issues with designing tech for biotics intended to be placed inside the human body, and how the presence of biotics changed every equation, and how biotic abilities were still so poorly understood. It had been a lovely conversation because one thing she and Clinton had always done well together was talk shop.

Then he said, his voice overflowing with concern, “I'd hate to see you drop to the floor during a routine training exercise, and start foaming at the mouth.”

Helen's opening sentence in that highly classified incident report she'd filed, just the day before? It had ended with, “...during a routine training exercise, Lieutenant Kowalsky dropped to the floor and began foaming at the mouth.”

Something finally clicked into place. Helen sat quietly through the rest of dinner. When Clinton left to go to the bathroom, she walked out of the restaurant, hailed a cab and headed back to base.

Clinton called her before she'd even made it to the end of the block. She blocked his calls. They got through anyway.

She showed Clinton's picture to gate security, explaining that he was a huge security threat. Then she found her CO and told him everything she knew and everything she suspected.

The fallout was quiet but brutal. Every biotic on the base had omnitools with Clinton's programs on them. Those all had to be confiscated, scrubbed and, in some cases, destroyed. Worse, the Alliance found hundreds of subroutines infecting the systems on the base that had been in place almost since they'd hired Clinton's firm. He could have, at any time, shut the base down, had he been so inclined. And they could only guess at how much classified information he had downloaded and saved for himself.

For better or for worse, though, his primary obsession seemed to be focused on Helen, and nobody else.

He'd gone through her emails. He'd listened to her calls. He'd installed spyware on her omnitool, including a program that had turned it into a passive camera, that he'd turned on at his leisure to spy on her.

Clinton cottoned on to the fact that Helen had turned him in, and vanished.
Helen found herself targeted for an official (but classified) inquiry of wrongdoing. The Alliance placed her under barracks restrictions for several weeks while they completed their investigation. Her only outside communication was with her parents on Eden Prime, whose home and farm was thoroughly searched by the Alliance. Even then, any call was recorded and analyzed.

During the investigation, Helen had to answer questions about every little argument, discussion, or off-hand comment she'd ever had with Clinton, including things said during their more intimate moments. (Yes, the term “get you off” was sexual in nature. No, it did not refer to being acquitted of any potential criminal charges. Yes, those were her “real” breasts. Yes, really.)

It was mortifying and invasive, and Helen came out of it feeling violated on a molecular level. She found herself repeating a mantra from her early days in the Alliance. “Don't cry. Don't bitch. Don't blame.” It was the only thing that kept her from falling apart in front of everybody else.

The day Helen was officially cleared of wrongdoing, she was told that her promotion from Lieutenant Commander to Commander was being placed on indefinite hold and that she had been transferred to the Terminus Systems, effective immediately. She would now help the Alliance chase slavers and Batarian smugglers, which were usually the same thing.

Helen kissed her cushy R&D job goodbye and went back to combat for the first time in five years. It wasn't too awful, she told herself, at least until she could find something else. She had no great love of combat, but she was good at it. And the hazard pay would be nice. She would make a go of it.

That sort of tenacious “can do” attitude lasted right up until her first shore leave, on Omega. Clinton showed up and caused a scene while she was having drinks with her squad. “How the hell did you find me?” she demanded.

"Oh, you're never getting rid of me,” he said, with a malicious grin.

She tried to have him arrested—he was wanted by the Alliance, after all—but the Batarian security guard who answered her call shrugged and said, “This ain't Council space, sweetie. You got no jurisdiction here. You wanna bring him in? Hire a bounty hunter. Better yet, get registered as a bounty hunter, and do it yourself. More fun that way.”

Her CO was sympathetic but unable to do anything, either. Clinton did everything within his power to hound, harass, threaten and terrorize Helen. He hacked her Alliance email. He hacked her private email. He sent threats, demands, and rants about how she was destined to be with him, about how much he loved her, about how much he wanted to kill her. He hacked into all of her accounts. He showed up on most shore leaves not in Council space.

Helen tried all kinds of ways to hide. She died her hair black to make her less noticeable in a crowd. She changed her passwords every single day. Her bank account was hacked so often that the Alliance finally set up a dummy account with a banker in Vancouver, who dispersed her funds for her.

Her friends, family, and colleagues were harassed, too. Some of them received emails or voicemails from Clinton, vowing that nothing would keep him and Helen apart.

Then Saren and his Geth attacked Eden Prime and killed her parents. It was worse than murder. Her parents had been husked, a new and unwelcome term to add to her vocabulary. She saw the security vids from the planet's surface. For the first time in years, and for weeks on end, Helen
sobbed herself to sleep at night.

After she returned from bereavement leave, the Alliance did an about-face on her promotion. She made Commander and was offered her old job back on Earth.

She declined. She was way too angry to sit at a desk anymore.

Tours of duty came and went. Commander Shepard killed Saren and his Geth. Shepard said, out loud and on camera, that Saren had been the puppet of that giant dropship, which was a sentient being. Just as the story started gaining traction, Shepard was killed. Any talk that Shepard was Brilliant but Mad was replaced with talk that Shepard was Heroic and Dead.

On the two year anniversary of her parents' death, Helen traveled to the Citadel for a memorial service for the victims of Eden Prime. The speeches were mostly about Nihlus Kryik. The Asari announcer mispronounced her parents' names.

And, because the universe hated her, Clinton announced his return to Council Space by grabbing her arm, and saying in a low voice, “Guess you'll have to talk to me here, won't you, Commander?”

Unfortunately for Clinton, the years of near-constant combat, his own terrorizing of her life, and the emotional toll of the memorial shredded any sense of restraint Helen might have once shown. She Warped his armor, then proceeded to punch his face bloody until C-Sec pulled her away.

They were both arrested. Clinton escaped from custody within a couple of days.

The Alliance was sympathetic and explained her situation to C-Sec. They never pressed any charges against her. Still, she was officially a problem and an embarrassment. She took a General Discharge, Under Honorable Conditions.

Her old CO from Vancouver, who had a crazy ex of his own, pointed her in the direction of the Andromeda Initiative. “They'll stuff a new implant in your head. It's dangerous as shit. You might not survive. You'll never see the Milky Way again,” he wrote, “but it puts an entire galaxy between you and that fuckin' nutjob.”

Helen thought about it for less than a minute. “I'm in.” she wrote back. “Just tell me where to sign up.”

* * * *

635 years later

Everybody on the Nexus knew about Christian's devotion to his wife.

Christian Parker was a nice young man who worked so hard to keep the Nexus up and running. He never left, not even during the uprising, because he was faithfully waiting for his wife, Helen.

Helen was with 20,000 of her fellow, frozen passengers, a year behind on the Ark Hyperion. To hear Christian tell it, Helen was perfect. Beautiful, jet black hair, creamy skin, and slate-colored eyes. Smart, funny, popular—Helen was everything he had ever wanted in a woman.

He showed her picture to everybody. He talked about how they first met; their first date; where they got married; and what they planned to name their children.
“I miss her,” he would say, with tears in his eyes. “I miss her so much.”

In reality, Helen had never heard of Christian, but she was all too familiar with her ex, Clinton. And as far as Clinton was concerned, Helen had some reckoning to do.

She’d led him on and on for months about how he could trust her. Months. Then the traitorous bitch had turned him over the Alliance. More unforgivably, she’d dumped him.

He'd sent her literally thousands of messages. She hadn't even had the courtesy to read them!

Did she have any idea how difficult she had made his life? She didn't know about the frantic extra-net searches every single time she moved. Did she even care about how rude her parents and friends had been to him when he'd call? All he'd wanted to know was where Helen was.

She didn't even know about how he'd had to uproot his life on Earth! Or how he’d spent hundreds of hours and thousands of stolen creds having to evade the law because of her.

And he still hadn't forgiven her for how she'd treated him on the Citadel.

He’d tried to catch her eye during the memorial, but she rudely ignored him, like always. It was an incredibly bitchy thing to do, after risking his freedom by traveling all the way to the Citadel. And instead of apologizing, Helen had beaten him to within an inch of his life.

Escaping C-Sec had been child’s play. He'd hacked into her email and read about her joining the Initiative.

Unfortunately for Clinton, the Andromeda Initiative screened all applicants with psych profiles and extensive background checks. It took some doing, and a lot of stolen creds, but he eventually found an information broker named “Fade” on the Citadel who could help. Fade gave him a new name, a shiny new fake ID, and a sunny personality profile.

Now he was on the Nexus, impatiently waiting for the Hyperion to arrive. He could hardly wait to see her face when she woke up after six centuries of sleep, only to realize that she would never live without him again.

The Scourge, though—that was the real blessing. With so many people at the top dead or missing, he suddenly found himself a mid-ranking security officer with better-than-average security clearance. The first thing he did was backdate the records, and have them listed as husband and wife.

What he did not anticipate, however, was just how long she was going to be in cryo. When the Hyperion finally arrived, the stupid higher-ups wouldn't prioritize Helen's thaw. As a biotic adept slated for potential combat, Helen's caloric requirements had her bio-tagged for slow-track thaw. “I understand your frustration,” Director Tann said, indifferently, “but we're in danger of running out of food as it is.”

And for the first time in his adult life, Clinton ran into a hard barrier that hacking couldn't penetrate. Bio-tags couldn't be faked, and no security devices could get around her biology.

He tried bribery, threats, pouting...nothing seemed to work.

When he found himself extra-frustrated by the situation, which was often, he would sneak into the cryo bay and jerk off onto her pod. “I'm doing this all for you,” he would tell her as he worked himself. “And when you wake up, you are going to be grateful, and sweet, and good...yeah, you are gonna be so good to me...”
That was how the turian caught him—with his dick in his hand, and several weeks' worth of DNA on Helen's pod.

"I thought I recognized you.” The dual-toned voice made him jump out of his skin.

“Do you mind?” Clinton said, as he fumbled his boner back into his pants. “I'm trying to have a moment here with my wife.”

The turian scanned the pod, and then him. Clinton did not like the look on the turian's face at all.

"Look, 'Christian,'” -the turian actually used air quotes, the fucker—“why don't you run along, and do whatever it is that Tann thinks you do.”

“Fuck you, asshole, I don't listen to you.”

The turian tapped his omnitool. A video started to play. It was Helen, on the Citadel, beating the ever-loving crap out of him.

“I used to be a Spectre,” the turian said mildly. “Nihlus Kryik was a friend of mine, so I was at that funeral.”

“Well, whoop-de-fucking-do,” Clinton said, his voice getting higher in pitch as he began to panic.

“I wonder what Commander Trevelyan would say if we woke her up, and asked her about her marriage. Do you think she'll be surprised?”

Clinton ran all the way back to his apartment. He checked security, and—oh, fuuuuuuck, that wasn't just any turian. That was the turian *Pathfinder*, who was now heading towards Nexus security.

Working fast, he hacked hydraulics to move Helen's cryo unit into one of the escape pods. He disabled tracking on the escape pod, and placed it on standby. He wasn't sure where he was going to go but he needed to get himself and Helen off of the Nexus *right now*.

He was shoving MREs into his pack when security began to force his door open. Just before they broke through, he released the escape pod out of standby, and into space.

If he was going down, the cause of all his suffering was going down with him. The last thing Helen Trevelyan deserved was a fresh start without him.

Security interrogated him for days about his identity and the falsification of his records, before anybody thought to check on Helen's cryo unit. By then, it was too late. There was no tracking on the pod, and no vector.

Helen was gone.

The turian Pathfinder was livid when he found out. He slammed Clinton against the wall so hard that it knocked one of his teeth loose. “Do you know what you've done? You sent her into the Scourge!”

Clinton smiled wide and nodded. “Yes.”

“It's murder,” the turian growled, dropping Clinton on the floor and looked at him with disgust. “You murdered her.”
“Yes,” Clinton giggled, finding the turian's expression completely stupid. “Good.”
Chapter two

Chapter Summary

Helen wakes up.

Chapter two

The Scourge never caught the pod, but a tendril brushed against it just enough to cause a microscopic leak in the eezo core.

For millennia, Helen drifted silently through the star systems of Andromeda. The eezo trickled into the escape pod, and eventually into the cryo unit until Helen was practically bathing in it.

Still, she slept. Her cryo unit gently bumped around the inside of the escape pod like an ill-fitting nesting doll.

Nearly ten thousand years after she had been shot from the relative safety of the Hyperion, her pod drifted into the gravitational field of a planet. As escape pods are designed to do, it automatically altered its descent to make sure the heat shield was at the proper angle. It landed safely on the side of a snow-covered mountain in the planet's southern hemisphere.

“Safely” being a relative term. Escape pods were designed to have their occupants awake and harnessed into crash seats. Helen lay unconscious and prone in an unsecured cryo unit. The cryo unit pinballed around the inside of the escape pod a few times, before it came to a rest leaning against the wall, upside down.

The unit went into emergency recovery mode, releasing the chemicals designed to revive its occupant. Once that was done, it began to mechanically intone its forecast of doom.

Helen became dimly aware of noise, light, and a massive, massive headache.


Her thoughts felt like they'd been covered in wool. Where was she? Why was she in a box?

“Warning. Unstable revitalization detected. Please stand by.”

Andromeda. Right. Already something was going wrong.

“Hello?” she tried to call, but her voice wasn't working yet. Her mouth felt cotton-dry.

She slowly moved her hands to the emergency latch. God, she felt awful.

It took a minute for her to realize that she was upside down, and that gravity was working against her. She finally managed to pop the latch but doing so nearly exhausted her. The lid creaked open. Helen tumbled out onto the tilted floor...of an escape pod?
Helen looked around. No, her eyes weren't deceiving her. She was in a standard escape pod, alone except for the cryo unit.

She dragged herself to the First Aid box and tapped it weakly with her palm. Its contents spilled out onto the floor. She grabbed a water ration, twisted it open and greedily sucked down its stale contents.

She tapped her omnitool. “Where are we?” she asked the VI.

“Unknown. Warning. The eezo core has malfunctioned. Element zero levels have exceeded safe parameters for human physiology. Please vacate to the nearest medical station and seek treatment.”

“Am I on the Hyperion?”

“Negative.”

“Where's the Hyperion now?”

“Unknown. Warning. The ambient temperature is dropping below recommended levels.”

Helen forced herself not to panic. Clearly, something had gone wrong. *Survival first, answers second*, she told herself.

Sitting in eezo for a few extra minutes wouldn’t kill her, but hypothermia might. She opened an emergency supply locker under one of the seats, as the VI politely reminded her that it was cold and that there was too much eezo. She found boots, thermals, and a tactical, packable jacket. She put everything on over the Initiative pajamas she was already wearing. Her bones creaked. *I feel ancient*, she thought.

She cracked open a couple of emergency heat packs. She drank another bottle of water, swallowed a couple of analgesics, and sucked down a couple of BioNRG biotic rations. Everything tasted *terrible*, and the texture was off. She didn't know if it was bad supplies, or if she just had several hundred years of sleep coating her mouth.

“Why am I in an escape pod?” she asked.

"Please refer to the security log associated with your cryo unit. Warning. The eezo core has malfunctioned. Element zero levels have exceeded safe-- ”

“Acknowledged. Discontinue warnings about eezo, please.” Helen tapped her omnitool and accessed the security logs.

The next thirty minutes were among the worst in her life.

It was Clinton. Because *of course*, it was. He'd somehow followed her into the Initiative. And had them listed as *married*. He'd been... *wanking off on her pod*. An authoritative-looking turian showed up, and Clinton fled. Not long after that, somebody (she didn't have to wonder who) hydraulically moved her into an escape pod and blasted her into open space.

She scanned the lid of her cryo unit. Sure enough, there was DNA for a “Christian Parker” on the lid.

She checked the dates on the security vids. “What's today's date?” she asked the VI.

“9 March 12,469 Galactic Standard.”
“Um...repeat?” she said shakily.

“9 March 12,469 Galactic Standard.”

She laughed. She couldn't help it. *Ten thousand years.* Hysterical giggles escaped her for a full five minutes. She only stopped because it exhausted her.

She used her omnitool to run a medical scan. She wasn't at risk of radiation poisoning from the eezo; she *already had it.*

“When did the eezo core malfunction?” she asked the VI.

“19 December 2819 Galactic Standard.”

She'd been eating and drinking irradiated food and water, and it would be fatal if she didn't get treatment soon.

“Is the external atmosphere breathable?”

“Affirmative. The external atmosphere consists of 76% nitrogen, 22% oxygen, .7% argon and .3% unknown element.”

“Are there any Initiative signals in the nearby area?”

“Negative.”

“Are there any signals of any kind?”

"Negative."

"Is this planet populated?"

"Insufficient data."

“Explain.”

“Passive scans upon entering the planet's atmosphere indicated the presence of extensive, non-organic structures.”

“Are any of those structures nearby?”

“Affirmative. The nearest such structure is located 4.7 kilometers to the south.”

“What is the temperature outside?”

“The current temperature is -2 degrees Celsius.”

*So, who’s up for hiking through the cold on an uncharted planet with a fatal case of radiation poisoning?*

The external cameras showed the upper escape hatch partially buried in snow. When she unsealed the hatch, she had to biotically blast the snow out of the way.

Doing so made her dizzy and nauseous. Like all biotics, she'd already had nodules of eezo all along her nervous system. Now, eezo permeated her entire body. *Right,* she thought. *Keep the biotics offline for now.*
When she regained her equilibrium, she crawled out of the escape pod and looked at her surroundings. It was nighttime. She was in a forested valley of some kind, on the sloped side of a mountain. The sky held two moons.

There were no buildings. No towers. No power lines. No running lights gliding through the sky as ships made their way in and out of a spaceport.

"Well, fuck."

Helen turned on the navpoint to the nearest known structure and started walking.
Chapter three

Chapter Summary

Solas finds the Anchor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Nobody knew who she was, or how she'd come to be at the Conclave.

According to a couple of clerics who had been at the Conclave only long enough to deliver papers and then leave, a back door to the Chantry had opened on its own accord, but they did not see anybody walk through.

According to the soldiers who responded to the explosion, the human fell right out of a rift, with the mark on her hand and odd clothing on her back.

According to Cassandra and Leliana, the stranger had babbled in an unknown tongue before she passed out completely. They declared her a foreign spy and placed her under arrest.

Solas could not say they were wrong. He had led a foreign magister to the orb, after all. Perhaps the woman worked for Corypheus.

In the event, the more the Chantry focused on the prisoner, the less the Chantry would focus on him. Turning himself over in Haven had been a calculated risk, but he finally had the Anchor in sight.

The woman's strange clothing and a single piece of jewelry (a bracelet) had been confiscated not long after she had been placed in the dungeon. Now she lay before him, unconscious, shackled and covered only in a dirty blanket, while the Seeker and the Spymaster loomed in the shadows.
He scanned her injuries with his magic. She was in poor shape, but the worst injury was the fractured skull and the swelling of her brain. He lay his hands on her head, reduced the swelling and knit the bone.

When slid his hands off of her head, most of her black hair wound up in his palms.

Solas frowned. He followed his magic through her bloodstream, fatty tissues, and nervous system, and found the problem.

“The prisoner has been poisoned,” he announced.

“Oh?” Leliana stepped out of the shadows and eyed the prisoner with interest. “With what?”

Solas' frown deepened as he tried to decipher the way his magic was interacting with the toxin in the woman's system. “Nothing I am familiar with.”

“If she is losing her hair now, it likely pre-dates the explosion,” Leliana said.

“Perhaps she poisoned herself before the Conclave,” Cassandra stated. “This could have been a suicide mission of some sort, and she was not expected to survive.”

“Perhaps,” Leliana said. She knelt by the prisoner and began to examine her, looking at the woman's limbs and opening her mouth and eyelids.

Solas stepped back for a moment and allowed Leliana to work. The bard had excellent observational skills, coupled with a formidable intellect. As long as her talents were not pointed in his direction, he could use her to his advantage.

“Well?” Cassandra asked.

Leliana stood back up and crossed her arms. “She is short, for a human, but has been in very good health for much of her life. She has perfect teeth and few scars on her skin. The calluses on her hands are not from farming, or from wielding any weapon I am familiar with. She has no ink stains on her fingers. The clothing she wore is most unusual, but...not luxurious.”

"So, not a peasant, not a noble, not a soldier, not a scribe,” Solas supplied.

Leliana nodded. “Is she a mage?” she asked him.

“No. I have found no trace of the Fade within her, save for the mark.”

As if hearing itself discussed, the Anchor flared up again. The prisoner cried out in her sleep, saying something in a language nobody understood. Solas knelt once more beside the prisoner and took her left hand in his, trying to soothe the mark into compliance. Upstairs, they could hear raised voices and footsteps running outside.

“Notify me if there are any changes,” Leliana ordered. Then she and Cassandra left.
As soon as they left, Solas abandoned any pretext that the prisoner's health was his top priority, and spent all of his focus on the mark. If he could just take it, coax it back to him, then he could close the Breach himself. He could leave these quicklings to their short and brutish lives, and start repairing the world from his own, much costlier, mistakes.

Twice, he slipped into the Fade, looking for answers. Twice, he quickly slipped back out. The Breach had twisted the Fade around Haven into a hellscape of nightmarish proportions. Any spirits that could have helped had either fled or been warped into demons.

The mark recognized him, responded a little to his magic, but...it was very attached to the prisoner, who was still dying by degrees from whatever poison was in her system.

By evening, Solas finally conceded to himself that he lacked the magical strength to forcibly remove the mark.

He looked at the prisoner with distaste. He was going to have to save this pitiful human, teach her how to use his mark, and then use her in whatever way he could in order to close the Breach, and get his Orb back.

Solas sighed. It was going to be a long night.

——

Leliana found him in the early hours of the morning. “How fares our prisoner?” she asked, breaking him out of his concentration of the prisoner's nervous system.

“While her other injuries are healed, I could not eradicate the poison in her system. I believe I have been able to neutralize it, however.”

“In what way?”

He slowly got to his feet and stretched his back. “I have never encountered anything like it before,” he said, truthfully. “The poison is neither chemical nor pathogenic. It was, however, slowly migrating towards several points in her body. Once it reached those points, it seemed to become inert. I simply...pushed it towards those points.”

Leliana nodded. “And the mark?”

Solas had to tread carefully here. He could not appear to want the answers he actually needed. “I have used wards to contain the mark, but I fear such measures will not last long until the Breach is more stable. Regarding that, I have two theories. First, some sort of artifact created both the Breach and the mark.”

“Artifact?” Leliana said, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“The Fade twists around the Breach and her hand in precisely the same manner. Not like the smaller rifts that are showing up, and not like other places in the world where the Veil is weak. They are identical and simultaneous. It must have been deliberate. An artifact or device of some kind is the only means of doing that.”

Leliana blinked once, her face unreadable. “And your second theory?”

“I believe that the mark can close the Breach.”

For just a heartbeat, Leliana's careful mask slipped. He saw hope ignite in her eyes before she
ruthlessly stamped it out.

“Why do you believe this?”

“Because the mark is deeply connected to the Breach. When the Breach expands, the mark expands. When the Breach is quiet, the mark is quiet. If the Breach can affect the mark, it stands to reason the mark can affect the Breach.”

“You don't know that,” Leliana said.

“No, I do not. As I said, it is only a theory. And we will need the prisoner herself to test it, preferably on a smaller rift.”

“I see,” Leliana looked at the prisoner. “I will bring this to the others’ attention. You should get some rest. Thank you, Solas.”

Then she left.

Well. He had done everything he could for the moment. He had moved the pieces into the most advantageous position for him. Now, he must wait for the pawns to step forward. He issued instructions to the guards to wake him if there was any change in the prisoner's condition. He left for his own quarters, and whatever rest he could find.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of quick notes for those of you who don't eat, sleep and breathe the lore of Mass Effect (for real, I know the history of the First Contact War better than most actual wars.)

Helen used her tactical cloak to sneak into the Chantry.

And, as mentioned in the comments, biotics have "nodules" of eezo along their nervous system. Solas just "pushed" the eezo from the engine core into those nodules.

And thank you to everyone who has left reviews and kudos! The feedback has been amazing!

UPDATE: ProcrastiKate decided this chapter needed her time and talent, and boy! Am I glad she did. Check out that AMAZING render of Cassandra, Solas and Helen. ProcastiKAte tumblrs over at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/
Chapter four

Chapter Summary

Helen wakes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter four

Solas had not even had time to undress for bed when the runner banged on his door.

He opened it to find a human infant, not fifteen summers old, in a near panic. “The Seeker needs you right away, ser!”

“Is the prisoner awake?” Solas asked, closing the door behind him, as they hurried towards the Chantry.

“Yes, ser. She killed a guard with her magic, ser.”

“She is not a mage,” Solas frowned.

“It’s just what I was told, ser,” the runner said.

Solas nodded and thanked the child, but privately thought that the runner must have misheard what had happened.

The Chantry dungeon was in chaos. Solas could feel the residue of multiple Templar anti-magic spells lingering in the air. A dead guardsman lay crumpled against the wall, his pants, and smallclothes down around his ankles. The man's bladder and bowels had voided at the moment of death.

The prisoner, naked, bloody and bald, crouched in a corner. Her shackles lay scattered in pieces across the floor. She was shouting in a language Solas had never heard before. She used her right hand to cast a barrier around herself, while she held her left hand up to her chest as if it pained her.

A handful of nervous-looking Templars, their swords unsheathed, stood nearby awaiting orders. Cassandra also had drawn her sword. Cullen was physically holding her back, as Leliana tried to calm the Seeker down. “We need her, Cassandra!” the spymaster was saying.

Solas walked by all of them, feigning a calm he did not feel, and placed himself between Cassandra and the prisoner.

Cassandra turned her fury onto him.

“You lied to us, apostate!” she shouted, as Cullen tightened his grip. “You said she was not a mage!”

Solas ignored her, as he surreptitiously tested the prisoner's barrier with his magic. He had never
felt anything like it. It felt strong. Solid. And utterly unlike the Fade.

“Commander, Seeker,” Solas said, “do either you feel any magic in her? Any hint of the Fade?”

Cassandra stopped struggling with Cullen. They both got a slightly distant look on their faces as they sought for the prisoner's magic.

“No,” Cassandra finally admitted. “I do not.”

“Neither do I,” Cullen said, looking at the prisoner with distrust.

Solas let out a puff of annoyance. “So, a Chantry guard attacks a shackled woman, and the Seeker's solution is to run a sword through her.”

Cassandra deflated a bit. “I...No. Of course not.” She sheathed her weapon.

Cullen let the Seeker go, and approached the dead guard. He grabbed the man's hair to look at his face. “This is Ivans,” he scowled. “He's a Templar. Why is he in a guardsman outfit?”

“The answer seems rather obvious, Commander,” Leliana said.

Cullen shook his head in disgust. “You!” he snapped at the guards. “All of you! You were here. Why did nobody try to stop this from happening?”

The handful of guards looked at each other for a moment. “Well...she's a murderer, Commander,” said one of the guards, speaking slowly, as if Commander Rutherford were stupid. “She had it comin', she did.”

“You mean, you were waiting your turn,” Solas said, coldly.

Cullen ordered his Templars to take the guards into custody, who protested that they “didn't do nuffink!” Cullen and Cassandra dragged dead Ivans out of the dungeon, leaving only Solas and Leliana with the prisoner.

Solas ignored the commotion. He instead focused his attention on the prisoner, who had turned an alarming shade of gray. He tried to send a healing spell over her, but nothing got through her barrier. “Leliana, she is going into shock.”

“Were you lying about her being a mage,” Leliana asked as she fished some potion out of a crate, “or were you just wrong?”

It was a fair question. “I have never seen this type of magic before,” he said. “She has maintained that barrier for several minutes, despite the fact that she is about to collapse. I cannot get my own healing magic through it.”

“I see.” Leliana squatted down just outside the prisoner's barrier. She lowered her hood, which made her look much softer and years younger. “My name is Leliana,” she said gently. “You have been injured, and we need to heal you. I promise that neither of us will hurt you if you cooperate.”

The prisoner replied in her strange language. Her voice sounded rough, like pebbles in a box.

“I am sorry,” Leliana said, “but I do not understand your language. Can you understand me?”

The woman hesitated a moment, before nodding slowly.

“You are going into shock,” Solas told her slowly. “If you will lower your barrier, I can treat your
injuries.” He held his hands out to show he was unarmed and acting in good faith.

She looked at them both, then lowered her right hand. The barrier disappeared. Leliana helped her to the cot, then found a dirty blanket and draped it over the prisoner's shoulders. The prisoner pulled the blanket as close as she could around herself. Her hands were shaking.

“Here,” Leliana handed the prisoner the healing potion, “drink this. It will help.”

The prisoner sniffed the potion but did not drink it.

“Can you tell us what happened with that Templar?” Leliana asked gently.

The prisoner started speaking again in her own tongue, then stopped herself after just a few words. She started and stopped a couple of times. Finally, she closed her eyes, as if concentrating very hard and said, “Me...to sleep?”

“You were asleep?” Leliana suggested.

The prisoner nodded. She spoke a few more words in her own language and mimed being punched in the face, right where her cheek and lip were split open, bleeding and swollen.

“He struck you?” Leliana said.

“There is...on top. No...”她说着，拉了拉莱莉亚的裤子。

“With a mailed fist, it seems,” Solas added.

That got them another nod. “Yes. He...on top. No...” she tugged on Leliana's trousers.

“‘He climbed on top of you with no pants on,” Leliana said. She sounded gentle, but in the short time he'd known the spymaster, Solas had only seen her icy, ruthless intellect. He wondered if she was genuinely sympathetic towards the prisoner, or if this was just part of her interrogation technique.

“Yes,” the prisoner whispered. “So I...” she held her right hand up and created a tiny ball of her strange magic. “No...no think?”

“You reacted instinctively,” Solas suggested, “and killed him in the process.” The prisoner nodded again.

“This is Solas,” Leliana said. “He can heal you.”

The prisoner looked at him. “You...” she seemed to be struggling for the right word, before settling on “doktor?”

“I am a mage,” Solas said, “much like yourself.”

The woman frowned at him, confusion on her face. “Mage?”

“Mage,” Solas agreed, pointing to the broken pieces of her shackles on the floor. “Your magic did that.”

The prisoner shook her head. “No magic.”

“But your barrier,” he said, miming the way she'd held her hand in front of her. Then he made a quick barrier of his own to illustrate his point. “Magic.”

“No magic. Is...biotics.”
“Biotics?” Leliana asked, directing the question to Solas. “Is that what they call magic in her country?”

Before Solas could answer, though, the prisoner asked a question, first in her language, then in theirs. “Why prisoner?”

Leliana said, “We should treat your injuries first. Do you have a name?”

“Helen.”

“Helen, you should drink that,” Solas said indicating the potion in her hand. “It will help.” Helen drank the potion.

“I am going to start with the bruises on your face,” he told her. She stared at his ears as he ran a wash of healing magic over her eyes and cheeks.

When he felt she had stared at his ears for far longer than was polite, he boldly met her gaze. Instead of the expected contempt for elves, or contrition at being caught staring, he saw only exhaustion and confusion in her eyes.

When he was done with her face, Helen ran a hand over her head. What few hairs remained came off in her palm. She looked at them forlornly.

“You were poisoned,” Solas explained.

“Yes,” she said as if this was expected news.

“I neutralized the poison by forcing it to migrate into discrete areas of your nervous system.”

Helen dipped her head, and thanked him in her own language, he was almost sure of it. “Where this is?” she said quietly.

“We are in Haven,” Solas said.

“Haven,” Helen repeated. “Where Haven?”

“In Ferelden,” said Leliana.

“Fe-rel-den,” she said slowly. “Fe-rel-den...planet?”

Her question was so ludicrous, so out of place, that Solas wondered for the first time if perhaps she was mad. He and Leliana looked at each other, Leliana's face showing the same surprise his did.

Solas tilted his head at her. “This world is called Thedas,” he said, in a tone that made it clear she should have known this.

“The-das,” she said to herself, then shook her head. The name meant nothing to her.

Leliana stood up and crossed her arms. Gentle Leliana was gone, and Sister Nightingale was back. “I need to retrieve your clothing. When I return, you will answer every question I have. Is that understood?”

The prisoner raised one eyebrow at Leliana and shrugged. Leliana turned and walked out of the dungeon.

“So-las,” she asked, “how I got here?”
“You fell out of a rift.”

“What is rift?”

“A rip in the Fade,” Solas said.

She stared blankly at him, then asked, “What is Fade?”

Solas made a spur of the moment decision. Whether she was telling the truth or just plain mad, this was an opportunity to present himself as an ally. Besides, he would not have to tell her anything she was not about to learn, anyway.

So, he spoke as quietly as he could, as if in confidence. “There was a gathering at a nearby Temple,” he explained. “It should have ended a civil war. Instead, an explosion killed everybody, including the spiritual leader who had called for peace talks. It caused a massive Breach in the Fade and left you with that mark on your hand. You are the only survivor and the only suspect.”

Helen remained silent, as Solas finished up his healing, and tried to strengthen the wards around the mark. The wards were not going to hold up for long, unless he—no, unless the prisoner—was able to calm the Breach.

As he worked, she looked at her hand. Then she took in the Chantry basement, and Solas, as if truly seeing where she was for the first time.

Leliana returned with Cassandra. “Your clothing has been stolen,” the spymaster said, clearly angry about it. “For now, you will wear this.” She handed the prisoner a pile of clothes.

Cassandra and Leliana held up the blanket to give Helen a little privacy while she dressed.

“Where is omnitool?” Helen indicated her wrist.

“Your bracelet? Stolen, along with your clothes,” Leliana answered impatiently.

“Not bracelet. Is...” Helen said something in her own language, then said, “is important.”

“It is a trinket. It doesn't matter,” Cassandra said, angrily, as she towered over the seated prisoner. “Who are you?”
“Helen Trevelyan.”
“Where are you from?”

She said a word in her own language, and then, in Common, “Ground.”

“Ground? What do you mean, you're from the ground? You're short, but you're no dwarf.”

Helen looked genuinely confused. “No, I...” then she started talking to herself in her own tongue. Then she said, “‘Earth.’ This The-das. Me Earth.”

There was a long silence, as the three Thedosians looked at Helen. Finally, Leliana asked Solas, “Is what she saying even possible? Could the Breach have pulled her through from another world?”

“I do not believe so, no. The Fade reaches everywhere in Thedas, but I have never heard of it touching any other world. Still, it would explain a great deal, if true. Her clothing, her language, the unknown poison, her magic...everything about her is an unknown.”

“The Breach is also an unknown,” Cassandra said. “Could she not have caused it? She deceived you into thinking she was not a mage, did she not?”

“She was never awake, and therefore was not capable of deceit. As for the Breach, it is not new magic. It is simply Fade magic, on a rather terrifying scale.”

“You believe her innocent, then?” Leliana asked.

“It is more accurate to say that I have seen little evidence of her guilt,” he said.

Leliana nodded once, then returned to the prisoner. “Why were you at the Temple of Sacred Ashes?” she asked.

Helen said, “I cold.”

“What do you mean, 'you were cold’?” Cassandra said.

Helen tried several times to explain but whatever she needed to say could not be done in the few words of Common she’d managed to pick up. She pressed her fists up against her eyes and spoke rapidly in her own language, her frustration at the language barrier getting to her.

The Anchor flared up, suddenly and violently, cracking through all of Solas' wards. Helen cried out in pain and shock, curling over her hand. Solas managed to clasp her hand between his. He tried to pull the Anchor to him with a calling spell. Not only did it ignore him, but it also seemed to make it worse for Helen.

A runner came sprinting into the dungeon. “The Breach is expanding again. Demons are everywhere. Commander Rutherford said he is heading out with his men.”

Leliana said, “Well, it appears we have the opportunity to see if Solas' theory is correct. Solas, please find Varric Tethras and locate a rift for the prisoner to use the mark on. The two of you can help with the demons, at least, until we can get this resolved.”

“We do not need Varric,” Cassandra said sullenly.

“Yes, we do,” Leliana said. “We cannot afford to turn such experience away.”

Ten minutes later, Solas found himself in possession of his staff and walking to the outer road in the company of a handful of guards and one extremely chatty dwarf.
Thank you to everybody who has been supporting this story, the feedback has been lovely!! I am still working on some formatting issues with the archive, so if you see any changes in the next few days on chapters I've already posted, it's just formatting, nothing substantive.

And a HUGE thanks to both of my betas. This chapter was a mess before their feedback.
Chapter five

Chapter Summary

Solas gets an up-close and personal look at his handiwork.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter five

It didn't take long before Solas, Varric and the guardsmen found themselves underneath a rift, fighting the wisps and shades that it vomited forth every few minutes.

The guardsmen were brave enough but barely older than boys, more hindrance than help. Solas sent the clumsiest one back to Haven under the pretext of telling Cassandra where they were. Another guard died within the first hour.

The dwarf, however, was indeed a veteran fighter. He and Solas quickly fell into a pattern. The rift would open up and discharge several demons. Solas would throw a barrier over everybody. The crossbow sang her deadly song. And a teenage guardsman would get in the way and make everything harder than it had to be.
In between skirmishes, Solas and Varric discussed what had happened. Varric, Solas was learning, loved to gossip.

"Curly was pissed. I haven't seen him that angry since Kirkwall,” Varric said, referring to Commander Rutherford. “All the guards involved are being punished. But behind his back, the men mostly feel the prisoner should be hanged for killing a Templar.”

“The Templar got exactly what he deserved,” Solas said, not bothering to hide his anger. “The Chantry has allowed such abuses for far too long.”

Varric looked up at the Breach with a frown. “Think she caused that?” he said quietly.

“No,” Solas admitted, “but neither did I think she was a mage.”

As the hours passed, Solas pondered the question of the prisoner's innocence. At various times, she had acted confused, wary, angry and in pain, but at no point had she ever acted evasive or defiant. If she were guilty, if she'd truly intended for everyone to die at the Conclave, why stop at killing a single guard in self-defense? Why not slaughter everyone, and walk away?
The afternoon wore on, with no reinforcements. The rift slowly grew larger, each round of demons just a little tougher than the last. They ran low on potions. Another guardsman fell.

“Dwe need backup, or we’ll have to retreat soon,” Varric said as he shot a demon. “I’m not dying in this shit.”

“Agreed,” Solas replied. He despised how weak he was, where a single afternoon of fighting minor demons could bring him to the point of exhaustion.

Then he felt a barrier go over him, strong and cool. Varric felt it, too, because he laughed and yelled out, “Let’s see you dance, you sons of bitches!”

Helen was there, trapping demons in a whirlpool of her magic, knocking back anything that got too close to herself or any of their allies. Her magic was oddly silent. It did not whisper, or comfort, or call out to him like magic should do.

Cassandra was with her, as well, quickly dispatching any demon within reach of her sword. A fight that had felt overwhelmingly difficult only moments before was suddenly over.

The second the last enemy was down, Solas grabbed Helen’s left hand. “Quickly!” he shouted, yanking it up towards the sky. Helen gasped in shock and pain as her hand directed the energy of the Anchor into the rift.

Solas hated her just then. No matter her innocence or guilt, for a few heartbeats, he hated her with all his being. The mark was his. It belonged to him.
Seconds. That was all it took before the rift imploded shut. Hours and hours of conventional fighting had gotten them nowhere, yet his Anchor had closed the rift in mere seconds.

Helen was shaking and pale. She stared at her hand in absolute terror. Solas pushed his hatred down deep within himself and put on the mask of the calm apostate.

“What you do, So-las?” she asked.

“I did nothing,” he said, keeping all traces of defensiveness from his voice. “The credit is yours.”

He explained that she had just proven his theory that the mark could close rifts. “It seems you hold the key to our salvation,” he said. The look on her face was one of utter despair.

It twinged at his conscience. He had no right to hate her. This should never have been her burden at all, and she would likely pay for his folly with her life. Telling Cassandra that he doubted Helen could have caused the Breach did nothing to lessen his guilt.

Cassandra and Varric argued all the way to the valley. Helen stumbled along in a daze. She kept looking around with wide eyes, taking in as much as she could.

The only time she did not appear lost was when they fought. She had combat experience and plenty
of it. Whoever she was, her unusual magic was exquisite. Her barriers were strong, solid things. She could make an enemy float helplessly in the air, or force it to remain immobile or launch it into the sky.

Other than her magic, she had no weapon of her own and was injured when a demon raked its claws down her back.

“Do you not carry a weapon with you?” Solas asked her.

She looked like she wanted to say a hundred things, but after a moment's struggle, all she said was, “No.”

“Here,” he handed her his knife, “you need something to defend yourself at close range.” She nodded her thanks. Cassandra frowned but did not protest.

They trekked back to the forward camp, battling unfortunate demons along the way.

“So... are you innocent?” Varric asked her.

“I no remember,” Helen admitted.

“There's your first mistake. You shoulda made something up.”

Helen ignored him, looking at their surroundings with a frown that got deeper and deeper as they trekked their way to the forward camp. Varric tried another tactic. “I've never heard your accent before. Where are you from, anyway?”

“Earth.”

“You're from the earth,” Varric repeated. “That's helpful.”

By the time they reached the forward camp, Helen had pulled into herself, shutting the rest of them out. She kept reaching for her right wrist, like a habit, as she stared up at the Breach. She only took her attention away from the sky when Leliana and Cassandra asked her to chose the path forward.

“Me?” Helen said, then snorted derisively.

“You bear the mark,” Solas pointed out.

She looked again at the Breach. “Soldiers,” she said shortly. They headed towards the gates. Helen remained silent the rest of the way and did not respond to any attempts to engage her in conversation.

They found Cullen and his men in deep trouble. As before, Helen did not hesitate to join the battle. Two shades that had flanked the Commander found themselves being sucked around a ball of energy. Her barrier dropped down on them all.

After she sealed the rift, Cullen snapped at Helen, saying they had lost “a lot of people” getting her there.

For the first time since she awoke, Helen showed a reaction other than fear, pain or indifference. The Commander had offended her. She pulled herself up into a straight, almost military stance, and slowly scanned the Commander from head to toe, anger and distaste written all over her face.

Nobody understood a word of what she said next, but they hardly needed to. It was delivered in an utterly scathing tone. When her tirade was over, she paused for a moment, then said,
“Kommander.”

It sounded like an insult. Cullen turned purple with suppressed anger but wisely said nothing. Instead, he turned away to help one of his men.

Helen watched them leave, glaring at Cullen's back. Then she closed her eyes and swayed for a moment on her feet. She hastily sat herself down on the ground and placed her head in her hands.

Varric, who was closest, knelt down next to her. “Easy now, easy now,” he said, pulling her a bit towards him, so she was in less danger of falling over altogether. She was pale, sweaty, and seemed to be on the verge of passing out.

“What is it? What is wrong? What has happened?” Cassandra barked out questions without bothering to wait for answers.

“My biotics,” Helen said, using her word for her magic. “Use…energy of body.”

“And you have had no food for the last few days, at least,” Solas said, suddenly understanding. Helen nodded.

“When was the last time you ate, sweetheart?” Varric asked Helen.

“Long time,” she mumbled.

“Ah, Chantry hospitality,” Varric said bitterly, handing Helen some strips of dried meat from his pouch. Solas found a crate of potion nearby and gave her one. Helen drained the potion and made short work of the dried meat. Solas handed her a second restoration potion and placed his hand on her forehead as she drank it. She was feverish.

Soon enough, Cassandra stood and helped Helen stand as well. “Let us go,” Cassandra said brusquely as they walked past the men.

When they reached the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Cassandra pointed out where Helen had first been seen. Helen looked more and more alarmed the deeper they went into the remains of the Temple, occasionally shaking her head to herself.

Solas kept his face in a mask of disinterested curiosity when he heard Corypheus' voice coming from the rift. Hearing Helen's voice, speaking in her language, was a surprise, however. It surprised her too, as her eyes opened wide when she heard her voice coming from the rift.

Poor Divine Justinia had yelled at Helen to warn people. Corypheus had only referred to Helen as “the intruder.” As in, “kill the intruder..” That was all the Fade would show them.

“You were there! That was you,” Cassandra said. “What did you say?”

“I say, 'What going on here?''' Helen said, looking confused. “I no remember this.”

Solas explained to Helen what she needed to do. Unseal the rift. Defeat whatever emerged. Close the rift. If all went well, it would close the Breach at the same time.

She raised her hand to the rift. A pride demon stepped through and laughed at them all.

Helen looked shocked at the size of the demon. She yelled out a word in her language that sounded like, “Yahg!” before she placed a barrier over everybody in the immediate vicinity.

The pride demon threatened them all, but its primary target seemed to be Helen. Anytime it saw
her, it headed her way. It poured lightning into their forces, causing barriers to fail and wreaking havoc with heavily armored soldiers.

Helen fought more like a rogue than a mage, dancing in and out of combat. At his instruction, she used the mark to disrupt the rift. He lost sight of her for alarmingly long periods of time, but then he’d feel her refresh his barriers, or see one of her unique spells. She shouted a lot. Nobody could understand a single word of it, but there was no mistaking the frustration and anger in her voice.

It was exhausting. The pride demon and its minions were losing, but the cost was high. Cassandra took a couple of bad hits. Several soldiers were outright slaughtered. Every time he caught a glimpse of Helen, she was a little bloodier, a little slower.

Finally, he saw the demon kneel in exhaustion. Cassandra took a running leap and drove her sword into its back.

Helen was on one knee, but the moment the demon fell, her left hand reached towards the rift.

This rift was much larger than the others she had closed. He could tell at once that, although she would be able to seal this rift, there wasn’t nearly enough power to actually close the Breach.

Maintaining the connection was taking a heavy toll on Helen. She almost fell over but caught herself with her right hand, rather than break the thread with her left.

She collapsed as soon as the rift closed. Cassandra called for Cullen. Varric ordered people to move, to give them some room. Everybody was shouting.

Solas shut them all out and ran to Helen's side. She was not breathing. He placed both his hands on her chest and pushed with his magic. “Odhea,” he ordered her. “Odhea!” He moved one hand to her forehead and sent every bit of magic he had left into her. “Sathan, Helen. Odhea.”

Her chest slowly expanded. He placed his fingers on her neck. Her heartbeat was threadily and weak, but present. Solas breathed an enormous sigh of relief.

The Anchor still lived.

---

1. “Odhea” = “Breathe.”

2. “Sathan” = “Please.”
Chapter End Notes

Thank you everybody who has left reviews and kudos. Helen and I appreciate it!!

An earlier draft of this chapter was beta'd. This version was not. I think I caught any new typos, but if I didn't, it's on me, not them.
Chapter six

Chapter Summary

The three days after closing the rift.

Chapter six

Solas followed the stretcher to a small, private cottage near the gates of Haven. Cassandra met them all at the front door.

Solas had to wait for everyone else to leave before he was able to check on the Anchor. It was more obedient, now that the Breach had calmed, but still not willing to leave its host.

Solas sighed, and then surrounded the mark with the strongest wards he was capable of placing.

It was the best he could do for the moment. Eventually, the mark would spread. In his current state, he was powerless to prevent it forever. But between closing the Rift and his wards, the woman should live long enough to seal the Breach.

He then checked on her overall health. She had the expected combat injuries but also appeared to be severely exhausted. Solas healed her as best he could, with what little mana he had remaining, before dragging himself back to his own quarters.

He collapsed into bed. He only walked the Fade a bit that night. It was mildly improved from the day before, but it had suffered its own traumas from the Breach and needed time to calm.

In the morning, as he walked towards Helen's cabin, he found Cassandra at the campfire next to Varric's tent. True to form, they were arguing.

"The Herald of Andraste?" Varric said. "Yesterday, you wanted her dead. Now she's the 'Herald of Andraste.' How do you think she's going to react to this when she wakes up?"

"If she wakes up," Cassandra said grimly. "The Herald's condition has worsened. I fear the worst."

"Well, the Chantry always did love its martyrs. After they were dead," Varric muttered.

Cassandra did not respond but the look on her face made it clear that Varric's words had found their mark. She turned to Solas.

"Solas. You have given your help freely, and owe us nothing. But the Herald is dying and you are her best hope. I would be most grateful for any assistance you can give."

"Of course, Seeker." He followed Cassandra to Helen's cabin, where she lay unconscious on a bed. Somebody had taken the trouble to wash her and dress her in a clean shift. The apothecary was sitting on a stool next to the bed, taking notes.

"Adan," Cassandra asked, "how is she?"

"Worse," Adan said, scowling fiercely. "She has a fever. And I swear, she seems to be thinner with
every passing hour.”

“She told me her magic consumes her body's energy stores,” Solas explained. “She has had no food or drink for days now, except for a few restoration potions and Varric's travel rations. And that was prior to battle.”

Solas placed his hand on Helen's forehead. She was burning up. He pushed healing energy into her but it seemed to simply vanish. Frowning, Solas placed a hand over his mouth while he pondered his options. He turned to Adan. “We need honey, a generous amount. Cool water. A few spoons. And restorative potion, as much as you can spare.”

Adan clomped out of the cabin.

“Can you heal her?” Cassandra asked.

“I will certainly try my best, Seeker.”

When Adan returned with supplies, Solas gently opened Helen's mouth and used a spoon to dribble water into her. She swallowed it reflexively. Then he slipped some of the honey onto Helen's tongue. She swallowed that, as well.

“Keep feeding her the fluids and honey,” he said to Adan. “Try and get all of it into her, even if it takes hours. She needs it. You want to use her body's autonomous responses, so use very small—”

“Maker's balls, mage, I know how to hydrate an unconscious patient! How 'bout I barge into your cabin, and tell you how to do your job?”

Solas ignored the man as he examined his subject. The Herald was burning with fever, but the Anchor itself was stable. He added some more gentle healing magic into her, hoping to ease her symptoms. When he was done, he said to Cassandra, “The mark is stable, at least for now, but she is not yet out of danger. She needs fluids and food and rest.”

Cassandra nodded, then asked him to follow her. Once they were outside the cabin, she said to him quietly, “What do you think of her claim to have come from another world?”

“I think you are more interested in telling me what you think,” he said.

Cassandra raised an eyebrow. “You credit me with too much subtlety, Solas. If I want you to know what I think, I will simply tell you. I am asking for your opinion because your knowledge of the Fade is far greater than my own. So I will ask again. What do you think of her claim?”

“I have never seen it happen before, nor heard of it, not in any of my travels into the Fade,” he said. “But, having fought beside her, and observed her magic and her mannerisms, I cannot dismiss such a claim out of hand.”

“Nor can I,” Cassandra sighed.

“Then you believe she is innocent?”

“I do. Wherever she is from, I believe that much, at least, even if I have already failed in my duties. My job is to Seek the truth, yet I know nothing about her. I never thought to ask her anything at all.”

“You are trying to make amends, Cassandra. It is more than most.”
Cassandra frowned and looked back in the direction of Helen's cabin. “It is kind of you to say, but I know better. She defended herself against a Templar who was violating her, and I tried to kill her for it. Am I not exactly what is wrong with the Chantry? And now she now looks to be our only hope.”

The Seeker shook her head before continuing, “If she survives and chooses to leave, could any of us even make her stay? I cannot neutralize her magic, and neither could the Templars. You saw how she fought, exhausted and sick. What will she be like after she is healthy and whole?”

“That is a good question. How will the Chantry react to having a mage in their midst that they cannot control?”

“Their reaction does not concern me. My only concern is how to fix the Breach. I need the Herald for that, not the Chantry.”

He spied Leliana heading towards them. “Did you have further need of me?”

The Seeker looked at him. “Will you stay, Solas? You have a place here for as long as you wish.”

“Perhaps. I would like to make certain the Herald recovers before I decide.”

Cassandra nodded. “I am grateful.”

He took his leave and walked back to his quarters. He was beginning to develop a grudging respect for the Seeker. It was rare to see a human, especially one of such rigidity and unquestioning devotion, able to see her own flaws so readily.

He pushed the thought away. One honorable woman with a single moment of clarity did not make up for an entire world of wrongness. He needed to focus on his duty.

**

Solas spent the next two days alternating between wandering the village and checking the Anchor. He reinforced the wards a few times a day, and, as long as he was there, applied another layer of healing magic to the Herald.

He saw the knife that he had loaned to the Herald among her things. He left it there, wondering if she would remember that he had given it to her and if she would return it. It was a small test, and perhaps an unfair one, given the pressure she'd been under at the time. But he was curious.

He also spent some time speaking with the elven servants he had recruited as agents.

They did not realize they were his agents. He had simply asked them to keep an ear out for anything they heard about the Herald. Like servants everywhere, they were more than happy to repeat gossip and rumor in exchange for a little coin.

So far, all they had heard were the rumors that Helen was the Herald of Andraste, and that some people wanted her dead.

Solas sought out Cassandra to report the rumors. Naturally, she was well aware of the threats. She and Leliana had quietly encouraged the “Herald of Andraste” rumor.

It was a useful fiction, he supposed. Not only did it explain the mark on her hand, it was also turning the tide of opinion in her favor.
The Herald awoke on the third day. He was standing with Varric at the dwarf's campfire when she first appeared, wearing the barbarian armor of the Avvars.

Solas shook his head. The choice of armor was a poor one. If the Inquisition was trying to promote the Herald as a holy chosen one, this was the wrong image to project. Had the Herald been large of build, or covered in war paints, the furs would have made her look fearsome.
Instead, their Herald was clean, pale, bald, and very small. The armor nearly swallowed her, making her look almost childlike.

He watched the crowds part in reverence as she walked purposefully towards the Chantry. Although she gazed back at the people with a seemingly calm expression, her eyes looked far too large for her face. When she met his eyes, her inner turmoil was obvious. She hated this.

As she continued towards the Chantry, Varric said to him, “Hell of a thing she's being asked to do.”

“Yes.”

Varric sighed, “This won't end well for her.”

“No,” Solas agreed. “It won't.”
Chapter seven

Chapter Summary

Welcome to Haven, Helen.

Chapter seven

One of Helen's first post-Clinton missions in the Terminus had been an assignment to recover a shipment of Alliance weapons that had been stolen by the Blue Suns. They got to the drop point, overpowered the Suns, and started cataloging the contraband.

Like a lot of their busts, they'd found a lot more contraband than expected. Helen and her team had also discovered mods from the Hierarchy, containers of knock-off designer clothing, crates of fake Egyptian relics (Ancient Egypt was all the rage that year with the Asari) and the obligatory shipments of red sand.

Oh, yes. And a yahg.

Young Lieutenant Epstein, despite extensive training to never open any contraband without scanning it first, grabbed a crowbar and cracked open a large shipping crate. The yahg, hungry, thirsty and pissed, tore into Helen's team with a vengeance.

They'd all survived, but it had been a close thing. Lieutenant Epstein was nicknamed “Schmuckatelli Redshirt” from that day forward.

That had been her only encounter with a yahg. She never thought to see another, until one stepped out of the rift at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Just on instinct, she'd yelled a warning out to her crew, and threw a barrier over everybody.

It took a second for her brain to recognize that the thing she was fighting was far worse than any yahg. It was twice as large and shot lightning out of its hands. She reached for her Carnifex before remembering she didn't have it anymore.

Helen threw everything she had left at the thing. It was terrifyingly enormous. Worse, it kept swiveling its giant, ugly head towards her, like it was after her personally.

Twice, she issued orders in English before remembering that these people weren't her crew, and didn't understand her anyway.

After that, she just screamed her personal opinions about the planet to the yahg.

She did what she could with her flagging biotics, and followed Solas' suggestions to weaken the yahg (they called it something else, a demon of some kind) by connecting her mark to the rift.

As soon as the thing was dead, Helen dragged her hand up to the rift to close it.

It hurt. Not that closing any of the rifts had been exactly fun, but this felt like somebody was pulling the marrow from her very bones.
This is killing me, she realized. And that was surprisingly fine with her. Everybody she'd ever known was dead. She didn't belong here and had no need to stay if she could just get this stupid rift closed. When the concussive shock from the blast hit her, she blissfully embraced the darkness. Her last thought was, I'll finally see my parents again.

She was bitterly disappointed to wake up and realize she'd survived.

It took a moment to get her bearings. Lying in bed in a cottage. A colony that had regressed to the dark ages. The Breach. That damned mark on her hand.

She pulled her left hand out from under the blankets. The glowing, green stigma that was now embedded there made her want to vomit.

Helen didn't for one moment believe that it was really magic, like in stories. There had to be a scientific explanation behind it somewhere. But magic or no, it was painful, foreign and unwelcome. If only she'd had her omnitool, she could scan it for...

Stolen. The omnitool's loss was an almost physical ache. Yes, it would have been invaluable in this environment, but what hurt the most was what she'd brought with her. Pictures and vids from her childhood, of her crews and friends, her parents...her entire past had been on that omnitool.

Helen sighed, pushing the thought away. That sort of mindset would not help her now. Don't cry, don't bitch, don't blame.

She had to still be in Andromeda, though, right? Ten thousand years was a long time but it wasn't nearly long enough for a single escape pod to drift across space at sub-FTL speeds and wind up in a separate galaxy. She could even still be in the Heleus Cluster, but she just had no way to know.

The locals called the planet “Thedas.” Helen hated it. She hated it with every fiber of her being. This planet was filthy, cold, and primitive. Back in the Milky Way, there had been anti-tech colonies scattered throughout the Terminus Systems. Was this what happened when one of them was left alone for 10,000 years?

Was everybody on the entire planet human? She'd seen no Asari, no Turians, no Krogans, no Salarians.

The locals might see themselves as “elves,” “dwarves,” and “humans,” but the phenotype didn't matter to Helen. What mattered was that they were all a bunch of backwater hillbillies with way too much bullshit and not nearly enough tech.

Focus, Trevelyan. Focus on what you know.

She was no longer in a dungeon. Good. No pervy guards were in her little cabin, and neither was their asshole boss, Commander Pauldrons. All good.

Her universal translator still worked. Good. It was frustrating, having to speak her words out loud, and then repeat what she'd heard in her own ear, but it was better than nothing. It would certainly speed up the process of becoming fluent in the local tongue.

She no longer had radiation poisoning. The medic, Solas—no, not medic, the mage—had somehow managed to cure her. Her biotics had seemed stronger than usual, but she'd also been sick, starving and fatigued. Her memories of the whole thing were very fuzzy, so she wasn't sure.

As Helen lay there, staring at the ceiling, a teenage girl walked in the front door without knocking.
She kind of freaked out when she saw Helen awake and dropped the box she'd been carrying.

The noise startled Helen into sitting up.

“Oh!” the girl said, looking half-terrified. “I didn't know you were awake, I swear!”

“Is all right,” Helen said.

The girl dropped to her knees. “I beg your forgiveness and your blessing. I am but a humble servant.”

What the hell? Helen stumbled out bed and helped the girl back up. “Please,” Helen said, “this no necessary.”

The girl was jumpy and uncomfortable, but before she fled, she managed to tell Helen that the Breach was still there, that it was quieter than before, and that Cassandra needed to see her “at once.”

Helen sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. She looked morosely at the mark. The Breach remained. Which meant that the mark was more than just a constant source of pain and radiation that was probably giving her cancer.

Now it was a chain to this absolute shithole of a planet.

Helen did not want to be here at all. But she couldn't, in good conscience, walk away and find a place that was more civilized. She wouldn't condemn them all like that. Especially not if, as she strongly suspected, these were all descendants of the Andromeda Initiative.

Looking around the little cabin, Helen spied a small plate with cheese, bread and fruit on the desk, and a bottle of dark ale. She wasn't a fan of ale, but calories were calories, and she was starving. As it was, she'd been without regular meals for so long that she'd be lucky if she didn't lose a tooth. She ate everything and drank the bottle dry.

She used the chamber-pot, which was completely revolting, and washed her hands in the small basin of cold water nearby. There was no soap, no toothbrush, just—cold water and a small linen napkin.

When she was done, she dressed in the warmest outfit she could find. It was armor made mostly of furs. It took a few minutes to figure out how everything belted on. Finally, she checked her appearance in the hand mirror.

The woman who looked back was unrecognizable—pale, bald and scared shitless.

She felt a flash of unadulterated hatred towards Clinton. The man had stranded her in a dark and distant future.

Her anger showed on her face. Ah, there. That angry woman, she recognized. That was Commander Trevelyan, who took down Batarian slavers, infiltrated smuggling operations, and disrupted merc groups.

Feeling stronger, if not better, she opened the door and saw what awaited her.
“Oh, shit,” she whispered. This...this was...she didn't even know how to respond to this.

Helen walked to the Chantry, trying her damnedest to school her face into something other than anger or fear. She caught a glimpse of Varric and Solas, who were standing together.

Varric gave her a sad little smile, which she appreciated. Solas looked at her like she was a science experiment, which she did not.

The back of the Chantry held Leliana, Cassandra and that bloated bureaucrat who still wanted her dead.

Cassandra and Leliana told him to cram it, in so many words, because people now thought that Helen was the “Herald of Andraste.”

“Excuse, please,” she interrupted. “What Andraste?”

This sent the bureaucrat into a frothing rage. She was an apostate, a heretic, a heathen, a murderer in their midst. Cassandra threw him out of the meeting.

The women explained to Helen that they had founded an offshoot of the planet's leading religion, and were likely viewed by many as heretics. Although the Breach now gave them the duty to save Thedas, the original impetus for Inquisition had been the civil war between the mages and the Templars.

“Mages?” Helen asked. “Like Solas?”

“Not exactly,” Cassandra said. “Solas is an apostate. Self-taught.”

Helen shook her head. “What that mean?”

“It means he was never part of the Circle.”

“What is Circle?” Helen hated that she sounded so ignorant, but damn it all, she was ignorant.

Leliana said, “Maker, you really don't know any of this, do you.” It wasn't a question. Helen wasn't sure the comment was even directed at her.
“Cassandra, go get Josie. And some food. And chairs. We need to have a long talk with the Herald.”

Cassandra left. Less than a minute later, a very pretty woman with a fancy dress and an even
fancier clipboard walked into the room.

Leliana introduced the woman as Josephine Montilyet, the Inquisition's Ambassador. “And how are you finding your accommodations?” Josephine asked.

“Better than dungeon,” Helen said.

“Well, I should hope so,” said the ambassador, not the least bit offended.

“Josie, when we were speaking with the Herald, it became clear that she had no understanding of either Mages or Templars,” Leliana said. “I thought it best if we give her a brief history of the conflict.”

Cassandra returned with a handful of servants, who carried chairs, food and tea service.

Once everything had been set up, the servants left and the door was closed. Cassandra offered Helen a plate. “Solas explained that your magic uses the energy from your own body,” she said, “and that you need more sustenance than most people. Is that true?”

“Yes,” Helen said, more than happy to eat again, and relieved that she would not have to explain herself in a place where food appeared to already be in short supply.

Once they had all filled their plates, and Josephine had poured tea, the other women began to explain to Helen about the Mage-Templar war.

The “brief history” took a few hours. The conflict had been centuries in the making, apparently. Leliana and Cassandra bickered about which side was more at fault, with Josephine often reminding them they were there to teach Helen about the past, not argue over its interpretation.

Helen lacked the language for the complicated questions she wanted to ask. When she did stop the discussion to ask for clarification, it took her a long time to get her questions out. So she mostly kept her mouth shut and listened.

In the end, what Helen learned was that, in Ferelden, Orlais and most of the surrounding countries, mages were forced into “Circles,” once their magic manifested. This usually happened in childhood or early adolescence. Obviously, it caused a great deal of heartache for both the child and the child's family.

“Children,” Helen said flatly. “In prison.”

The Templars watched over the mages in the Circles, ostensibly to protect them from both their own magic and from bigoted outsiders. While some Circles were models of stability and viewed as learning centers, such a system was ripe for corruption, which Helen had figured out before they'd even finished describing how the system worked. Templars in many Circles had been allowed to abuse, maim, rape, torture and even kill mages with impunity.


Frankly, the entire system was appalling. That war had broken out was as surprising as water being wet.

The Conclave had been widely viewed as the last, best chance of reconciliation. Divine Justinia had convinced both sides to the negotiations. She was widely loved and respected.

That was who Helen had been accused of killing. The Divine, and all of those participants on both
sides actually willing to give the peace talks a fair chance.

Then there were the Dalish elves, who followed their own gods and had their own ways of handling mages. Dwarves were immune to magic and had an entire economy based on mining the lyrium.

“What is lyrium?” was one of the few times she interrupted a discussion to ask for clarification. Lyrium, she learned, was a mineral which mages used to enhance their powers, and gave Templars their anti-magic capabilities. It was also highly addictive to Templars, which kept them under the control of the Chantry.

Then there were the Qunari, a race she had not met yet, who were known for their excessively brutal treatment of their own mages.

The discussion was long and exhausting, and only scratched the surface of the politics. It did nothing to explain what magic actually was.

Helen found herself with a full bladder. It was as good a time as any to discuss some of her own missing knowledge.

“I have questions.”

“Of course,” Josephine said. “What can we help you with, Herald?”


The three women looked back at her, momentarily at a loss. Josephine recovered first. “Certainly, Herald. Why don't I give you a quick tour of Haven?”

“I need toilet first.”

“Josie, let's save the tour for later,” Leliana said, as she looked at Helen searchingly. “I think we need to ask the Herald some questions of our own.”

“Agree,” Helen said.

Josephine took her out the back of the Chantry and showed her the women's outhouse. It was, as expected, filthy, dark and foul. Not that Alliance latrines smelled fresh and clean, but they had been sanitary, at least.

“Where to wash hands?” she asked.

Josephine looked at Helen like she was the most wonderful thing she'd seen all day. “Oh! If you only knew! Leliana and I have been begging the others to please set up washing stations, but they think it 'Orlesian nonsense!'”

“Is filthy!” Helen exclaimed. “Spreads disease.”

“Please feel free to share your opinion with Cassandra and the Commander. Chancellor Roderick. Flissa. All of the Chantry sisters. Everybody.”

Josie then took Helen to her own quarters. She had two large basins on stands, with full water pitchers and little cakes of soap. Helen gratefully washed her hands. Josie said she would see to it that Helen had a similar setup in her own quarters.

“Herald, I must ask—why did you choose to wear that...fur?” Josephine asked.
“Is warm.”

“Ferelden is cold, but we can get you something else which is just as warm, but far more flattering.”

Helen wasn't offended. If Josephine wanted Helen to wear a clown suit and juggle knives, she'd do it, as long as she placed soap and hot water within Helen's reach.

As they made their way back to the Chantry, Josie explained that teeth were usually cleaned with a dab of toothpaste and a small cloth wrapped around the end of a stick. Bathing was limited to water, soap and a cloth, at least in Haven. Baths were easier to find in larger cities but were considered to be something of a luxury item. Fereldens, however, viewed them as a novelty, at best, or a scandalous waste of fuel, at worst.


Josephine linked her arm through Helen's. “Oh, Herald,” she said, beaming at her. “We are going to be such good friends.” Helen laughed for the first time in ten thousand years.

“I agree,” she said. Her good mood didn't last long. Leliana and Cassandra had brought another person to the War Table.

Commander Rutherford.
Chapter eight

Chapter Summary

Cullen is not having a good day.

Chapter eight

Cullen woke up thinking about lyrium. In truth, he'd hardly slept, so he wasn't so much “waking up” as he was “getting out of bed.”

He thought about lyrium as he got dressed. He thought about lyrium as he put on his armor. He thought about lyrium as knelt by his cot and recited the Chant of Light.

He had already endured the most massive disasters of this Age, including the Blight, torture at the hands of blood mages, a Qunari invasion of the Free Marches, a terrorist attack in Kirkwall, the madness of his Knight-Commander, and the mage uprising.

When things had been at their worst, lyrium had been a comfort, a balm. It had given him strength and had soothed his insecurity. It had shackled him to the Chantry, but it had also removed from him the burden of thought.

Now, in the midst of the single largest catastrophe in the known history of Thedas, one that made the Blight seem manageable by comparison, Cullen was dealing with the ever-present itch of withdrawal. Worse, he was in charge.

He was cocking it up.

Ivans. He grit his teeth to even think the man's name. He had allowed Ivans to come to Haven as a favor to the Knight-Commander of Starkhaven. Ivans had been suspected of making apprentices in the Starkhaven Circle... service him. He'd never been caught, and none of the apprentices would talk.

Cullen had agreed to bring him to Haven, telling himself that Ivans would be no danger because there was no Circle in Haven for Ivans to abuse.

But never in his life had Cullen been so overwhelmed.

Cassandra had initially asked him to join the Inquisition to help subdue the Mage-Templar conflict. He'd been in Haven, along with Cassandra and Leliana, expecting to help negotiate a peace.

Instead, he had a front seat for yet another terrorist attack and the horror of Breach. Overnight, he'd had to take on the duties of training an army.

With all of his new responsibilities, not to mention his withdrawal symptoms, “check the guard rotation” dropped off of his list of priorities. That was how Ivans had been able to attack the most important prisoner in all of Thedas.

When he'd seen her outside the Temple not five hours later, he had been so focused on fighting demons that he'd forgotten— he had honestly forgotten!—what his men had done to her. All he had
seen was the stranger, with magic no Templar could contain, who had caused the Breach.

Well. He'd seen the hatred in her eyes and had heard it in her voice. He would not forget again.

He headed to the training grounds and thought about lyrium.

* * *

Cullen watched the people of Haven stand in silent respect for the woman who had calmed the sky. “The Herald of Andraste,” they called her.

Personally, he thought she looked like a savage, with her bald head, dressed in discarded barbarian furs. She might look like a savior to the people of Haven, but to Cullen, she looked like a prophet of chaos.

Cassandra found him later that afternoon. “Cullen,” she said. “you are needed in the Chantry.”

He issued instructions to his Lieutenant and walked back to the Chantry with the Seeker. “Well?” he asked. “How is she?”

“Physically, she is well enough.”

“Have you learned anything about her?”

They walked in silence for a moment more before Cassandra lowered her voice and said, “You know about the rumors that she is from another world?”

“Maker, yes. At least one recruit states it as fact every training session.”

Cassandra said, “I am inclined to believe her.”

“That seems...”

“Impossible, I know,” Cassandra said. “But you saw her magic, did you not? And there is more. She doesn't know this world or understand it. When Leliana and I informed her that people were calling her 'The Herald of Andraste,' she asked, 'what Andraste?'”

“You're joking.”

“No. Cullen, she had never heard of Mages, or Templars, or Circles. It was all new to her.”

“She could be lying,” Cullen pointed out.

“She could,” Cassandra agreed. “And how you feeling, Cullen? Are you sleeping at all? Have you eaten yet today?”

“You're very pushy, Seeker. Has anybody ever told you that?”


When he got to the War Table, servants were clearing plates and tea cups. Cassandra snagged a remaining sandwich from one of the trays as it passed and handed it to Cullen. He ate it in three bites. He did feel better, although he wasn't going to admit it to Cassandra.

Minutes later, Josephine and the Herald walked in, arm and arm, giggling over something. The Herald was smiling. She was short—shorter than most elves, even. The furs she wore almost
swallowed her frame. She looked like nothing more than a little girl, playing soldier in her father’s armor.

Then she saw him. The smile vanished. Her eyes, which had been sparkling and brilliant, now looked at him with distrust and cold calculation. She patted Josie’s arm once, then pulled from the Ambassador.

The Herald walked to the War Table, across from Cullen.

Introductions were made, and Cullen’s role was explained. The only acknowledgment from the Herald about his role was a short nod and a frown.

“Herald,” Leliana began, “we need to discuss the issue of where you come from.”

The Herald nodded once. “Agree.”

“You said that you were from a world called, 'Earth.'” Leliana said.

“Yes.”

Cullen found her accent strange, like pouring gravel over the Common tongue.

“And that you were at the Temple of Sacred Ashes because you were cold?” Leliana continued.

Cullen openly scoffed at this. “Maker, did you really? You got cold, and thought you'd just pop into one of the most sacred places in all of Thedas?”

The so-called Herald barely spared him a glance. “Yes.”

“Why were you were cold?” Leliana continued, with a look towards Cullen that said *keep your Ferelden mouth shut.*

“I walk snow. At night. I cold. I see Temple. I go inside.”

“So the vision was true,” Cassandra said. “The Temple was still intact when you entered.”

“Yes.”

“But you said the Breach pulled you from your world,” Leliana's voice had gone hard.

“No. You say that.”

Leliana began to argue until Cassandra interrupted her. “She is right, Leliana. She said she came from another world, but you were the one who asked Solas if the Breach could have pulled her here.”

“So-las say no,” the Herald reminded her.

“He said had never heard of such a thing happening before,” Cassandra was correcting the Herald now, “but that it would explain a great deal about you.”

“How did you get here?” Leliana asked.

“My ship crash.”

“Your ship,” Leliana said. “The nearest ocean is at least a fortnight away. There is nowhere for any
ship to crash.”

*Finally, Cullen thought, we’re getting somewhere.*

“No ocean ship. Space ship.”

“Space?” Leliana asked. “What do you mean by ‘space’? Which space?”

“Space,” the prisoner said as if this should make perfect sense. “Outer space.” She pointed vaguely towards the ceiling. “Stars.”

“Ridiculous,” Cullen muttered.

Helen shot him a look of complete disdain. “Leliana,” she asked, “you find omnitool?”

“What is she talking about?” Cullen asked.

“Her bracelet,” Leliana said. “No, Herald, we have not.”

“Maker save us,” Cullen scoffed. “There are hundreds of people dead. The Breach has torn open the sky. *We’re at war,* and she’s worried about a [bracelet](#)?”

The Herald did a thing that was very disconcerting—muttering to herself, before speaking again. “Is not bracelet!...Is tool, my memories...maybe memory from Breach.”

“Your memories,” Leliana said flatly. “Let me see if I have this straight. Your ship sailed through the stars and landed at the Conclave. You are the only survivor of an explosion that you don’t remember. You use magic that you claim is not magic. And the one thing that might prove that what you are saying is true is a stolen bracelet.”

“My ship proof,” said the prisoner.

“The ship you came here in?” Leliana asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s still here?”

“Probably.”

“Could you tell us how to find it?” Leliana asked.

“Yes. Is dangerous. The...poison? In me? Was from ship. No get close, no stay long. No touch.”

“Show me,” Leliana said, pulling a map of Haven and the surrounding area from a shelf and unrolling it. The women started talking. Cassandra asked the Herald to draw where she thought the ship was.

Cullen felt adrift as he watched the Herald. He couldn’t trust his instincts, not right now, not when he had been so wrong, so often before.

Cullen almost—*almost*—believed she was sincere, but her story made *no damn sense at all.* Every time he thought she was about to walk into proof of her guilt, she seemed to wiggle out of it with another, more fanciful statement.

*Just like a mage.* The thought came unbidden. He tried to shove it aside but could not.
“Why did you come here?” he asked, just as the Herald had finished drawing a crude map, and a sketch of something that looked like a cross between an egg and a jar.

“You arrest me, no?” she said, not looking up from her paper.

“That isn't what I mean. Let's say I believe your ludicrous story, although, for the record, I don't. But assuming I did, why did you come to Thedas?”

The Herald met his eyes, and for the first time since he'd met her, it wasn't in anger. “By mistake,” she said, her voice very quiet.
“What do you mean?”

Helen tried to explain, but even when she spoke to herself in her language, he could see that she was getting frustrated.
“I sleep on large ship...bad man, he take me. He...threw me. Into space. I...sleep ten thousand
years. I land on Thedas. I wake up. It snow and dark and cold. I find Temple. Now...” her breath
hitched so convincingly, he almost believed it. “Now, I here.”

Cassandra and Josephine clearly believed her. Leliana was much more skeptical. “You were asleep
for ten thousand years?”

The Herald nodded.

“Herald,” Josie said gently, “if we find your ship, could you return home?”

“No.”

Leliana, her face hard as glass again, said “There's something else I don't understand. How is it you
barely speak our language but still understand everything we say.”

“Good point,” Cullen muttered.

“I understand all language,” the Herald said.

“All language,” Leliana repeated. Cullen decided that Leliana repeating something in a skeptical
tone was an extremely irritating interrogation technique.

“Every language. Yes.”

“Even if you've never heard it before, you understand every single language?”

“Yes.”

Leliana started reciting something in Orlesian. Cullen happened to recognize it as a prayer from the
Chant of Light.

The Herald looked like she was listening to something. “Say again, please?” Leliana did. The
Herald said, “Une prière?”

“One of them,” Leliana said.

Josephine then started speaking in rapid Antivan. Helen smiled a little at the Ambassador.
“Gracias, Josephine. Jabón es...bueno?”

Leliana and Cassandra had not apparently needed any translation for the exchange, but Cullen did.
He looked at Josephine, who said, “I was telling the Herald that I would make certain that she had
plenty of soap and water in her quarters. She thanked me and said, 'soap is good.'”

“Well,” Leliana said, “I am still not certain I can believe your story. It is very...far-fetched.”

“Yes,” Helen agreed.

“But no matter where you came from, I do not believe you were responsible for the Divine's
death.”

“Nor do I,” said Cassandra.

“Nor I,” said Josephine.

They all looked at Cullen expectantly.
“I do,” he said, without any trace of apology in his voice. “I find your story nonsensical. If it weren't for that mark on your hand, I'd have had you executed. I have seen no evidence of your innocence, only your guilt.”

“You believe I kill those people?” she said calmly. “Truly?” She looked at him directly, no anger or hatred on her face. She genuinely wanted to know his opinion.

“Yes,” he said, thinking about the scene in the dungeon, where not one Templar had been able to get through her barrier. “I do.”

Leliana and Cassandra looked like they wanted to kick him. Josephine started wringing her hands. The Herald, however, didn't seem bothered by it at all. After muttering to herself again, she said, “You no believe that. You just...shame I kill your man.”

“That is not true!!” Cullen yelled, his voice much louder than he intended.

“No?” the Herald said, one eyebrow raised. “Your guards that...protect man I kill. What happen them?”

“Protect—they didn't protect him,” Cullen protested, “They just...” he struggled to find the right words, and realized there weren't any that wouldn't make it worse. “They are on half-rations and barrack-restrictions for two weeks, plus they've lost any leave time they've accrued. Not that they would have time to take leave, anyway, but whatever it was is gone now.”

A long, uncomfortable silence permeated the room. He glanced at Cassandra, hoping for some support, but she was glaring at him. Josephine's expression was the polite mask that he was sure she'd perfected at court. Leliana looked disappointed in him.

After muttering angrily to herself, the Herald said, “No...court-martial? No...discharge from ranks?”

Cullen stammered a bit and started to argue, then her words sank in—court-martial, discharge...

“You're a soldier.”

“I Marine,” she said, slowly, tapping on the war table. “Naval officer.”

Cullen rocked back on his heels, before rounding on the other advisors. “Maker's breath, she just admitted that she's a foreign military officer! She's standing right here in the middle of our war room! For all we know, she could have been sent here to spy on the Inquisition!”

And the Herald, Maker damn her, laughed at him, before lowering her face into both of her hands. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, before raising her face to him again. Her eyes were red and shone with unshed tears, but her gaze was steady. “Everybody I know dead ten thousand years, Commander,” she said, her voice very rough. “Nobody left to spy for.”

“Why didn't you mention before that you are military?” Leliana asked.

“Nobody ask.”

Cullen bit back the truly blasphemous words that had bloomed on the tip of his tongue. He pushed the heels his hands into his eyes and thought about lyrium.

“What is your rank, Herald?” Leave it to Josephine to ask that.
“Commander,” said the Herald, “but I...retire from Navy.”

“You're the same rank as Commander Rutherford?” Cassandra said.

The Herald shook her head in the negative. “You more like...Admiral,” she said.

“General,” Cullen corrected, automatically. “The Inquisition doesn't have a Navy. Only ground troops, such as they are.”

The Herald looked at him in the eye, any trace of the misty-eyed woman from a few moments before was gone. “Commander. If you think I guilty, your men think I guilty. You need decide,” she pointed to the door, “or all this for nothing.”

“She is right, Cullen,” Cassandra said.

“Ask, Commander,” the Herald said. “You want ask me, so ask.”

He tried to look at her objectively. Maker, she was tiny. She was taller than Varric, but not by much. But she stood straight, her shoulders thrown back, her chin up slightly, not in defiance but confidence.

“Did you kill the Divine?”

“I no remember,” she said, “but...no reason to.”

“Are you really the Herald of Andraste?”

“No.” They both ignored the noises of discontent coming from Cassandra and Leliana. This was between him and the Herald.

“Do you believe in the Maker?”

“No.” Cassandra frowned at the Herald, who kept her gaze on Cullen.

“Where does your magic come from?”

She looked a little exasperated at that. “Is not magic, Commander. Is biotics. Is a...substance in my body. Allow me do,” and she created a small, blue ball of light in the palm of her right hand, “biotics.”

Cullen reflexively reached for his sword-hilt, and called to the dwindling lyrium in his system, before he remembered how useless that was.

He couldn't hear her magic at all, and it raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

“You can touch,” she said. “This no hurt you.”

“No, thank you,” he said, shortly.

She did not look offended. The little ball vanished.

“Your magic,” he said, deliberately using the term, “is unnatural. No Templar can stop it. No mage can stop it. If anybody was capable of causing the Breach, it was you.”

The Herald tugged off her gloves. The mark shone weakly in the creases of her palm. When he focused on it, he could hear the Fade calling to him, although the whispers were fainter than they
used to be.

She pointed to the mark. “This. No. Biotics!” she said, angrily. “I no want this.”

“Which is an easy thing to say when nobody else can use it!” he shot back. “That mark and your magic give you an unholy amount of power! You may be the strongest living mage in all of Thedas right now! If you turned into an abomination, nobody could stop you!”

She blinked at him for a few moments, her brows knit together. “What is...a-bom-i-na-tion?”

Thank the Maker that Cassandra answered, (“You'll recall our discussion this morning, Herald, about possession?”) because Cullen had been rendered speechless by that single question alone.

Everybody in Thedas, even the smallest of children, knew what an abomination was.

He watched the Herald's face as Cassandra explained the concept. The Herald listened intently, but he could see she was skeptical. She doesn't believe us, he realized.

And that realization made him simultaneously believe that she was from another world, and hate her all the more for having the luxury of never knowing the fear of magic.

“I believe you,” he said, interrupting Cassandra, “Maker help me, I believe you are from another world. But,” he gripped his sword hilt and tried not to think about Kinloch or Kirkwall, “you need to believe us when we tell you about the dangers of this world. Possession is real, Herald. I have faced it myself, far more often than I would have ever wanted. Guilty or not, you need to understand that.”

The Herald looked him intently, her eyes lingering on that damned scar.

Then she stood up straight and snapped her right hand to her forehead, her hand firm, the tips of her fingers just touching the outer edge of her eyebrow, palm angled slightly down. Her left arm was at her side, fingertips rigidly pointing to the floor.

She maintained eye contact as she did it. It was a foreign—but unmistakably military—salute. It was both an acknowledgment of his position, and notice that she was outside his chain of command.

Maker, he wanted to throttle her.

Instead, he saluted her in return. Heels together, right fist over his heart, elbow at a right angle to his body, arm parallel to the floor. After several seconds had passed, she said something in that language of her and relaxed her posture. He did likewise.

“Yes. Well,” Leliana said, “If you two don't mind, perhaps we can get back to matters at hand.”

Cullen pinched his eyes against the headache that was forming and thought about lyrium.
Chapter nine

Chapter Summary

Helen tours Haven.

Chapter nine

The rest of the meeting was uncomfortable but productive.

Josephine asked about Helen's family. Siblings? No, only child. Were her parents nobility? No. What did they do? They were farmers, first on Earth, then on Eden Prime.

"Eden Prime is another country?" Josephine asked.

"Another planet," Helen replied.

There was a long silence that Helen suspected she would hear a lot if she continued to discuss how things had worked in the Milky Way. "So, you just, what—go to other worlds all the time, whenever you feel like?" Cullen asked sarcastically.

"Yes," Helen said.

Cullen opened his mouth like he was going to argue, but Josephine cut him off. "We are here to establish the Herald's background, Commander. I believe we are in agreement that the Herald is the daughter of farmers, yes? So, I will make that part of her family history."

The Ambassador scribbled something down, then asked, "And how old are you now?"

Helen wasn't even sure how to answer. Was she still thirty-one? Was she 10,000? Josephine seemed to understand her confusion and said, "I will clarify—how old do you think you are?"

"Thirty-one."

"Marriage?" Josephine asked gently. "Children?"

"No."

"How do your people handle magic?" Leliana asked.

Helen struggled to explain it adequately. She managed to get out that biotics were usually identified during adolescence, that training was voluntary, and that there was no such thing as demons or possession.

She lacked the language to explain much else with any clarity. It was hard enough explaining element zero to people in the Milky Way. And how could she talk about the Asari, who had always had biotic abilities?

God, she missed her omnitool.

Leliana and Cassandra wanted Helen to head out the following day to a place called the
Hinterlands and meet with a nun who might help them. Josephine thought Helen should take at least a week to get her bearings and learn about local customs. Cullen mostly glared at her.

Helen thought Josie had a point about her learning how to navigate Thedas, but she also couldn't wait to get out of Haven. It was cold, and it stank. It was also a military post, where the leader of the Army utterly loathed her.

“I leave two days.”

Leliana and Cassandra decided that the official position of the Inquisition was that the Maker had brought the Herald to them from another world in their hour of need.

“But not true!” Helen protested.

“It is a matter of interpretation,” Cassandra said. “You are exactly what we needed when we needed it. Who's to say that the Maker did not bring you to us?”

It was also decided that, for the moment, Helen should keep her ability to understand all languages to herself, even from the other members of her team. “It's a useful skill,” Leliana said. “You never know what you might learn.”

As soon as the meeting was officially over, Cullen stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

“He had been under a great deal of pressure for some time,” Cassandra said, “but he believes you. That is enough for now.”

“His men,” Helen said, shaking her head, and hating her language barrier, “he hate me, his men hate me, too.”

“I will speak to him about it,” Cassandra said.

Josephine sent Helen back to her quarters, saying she would join her there shortly. Fifteen minutes later, Josie was busting through the door with a few servants in her wake. They set up two wash basins, extra towels, soap and pitchers of water. There was also a pearl-handled stick, a jar of charcoal-based toothpaste, and small bits of flannel for cleaning her teeth.

Josephine was carrying a box which, when opened, revealed books, a half-full inkwell, some charcoals and quills, paper, and an empty journal. Josie placed everything on the table. “Your first language lesson begins,” she announced.

Josephine spent the next hour teaching Helen the letters of the Common language. “I want you to translate some simple songs of your culture into the Common tongue,” she ordered. “Allow people to correct your grammar, no matter how rude they might be about it. Oh! And ask Master Tethras if he will loan you some of his books! He is a famous author, you know! His books are positively scandalous!”

Before she left, Josephine showed Helen how to light the lamps, bank the fire at night, where the matches were for candles and made several pointed suggestions about what to wear going forward.

Then, she delicately handed Helen a small silk bag of soft, flannel pads, “for that time of the month.”

Helen suddenly felt a bit sick.
Like everybody who had signed onto the Andromeda Initiative, she had agreed to a reversible form of sterility. The Initiative had a plan—make the habitats viable and productive, then reverse the sterility, and encourage an Andromeda baby boom.

Everyone, including herself, had undergone genetic testing and psychological counseling. She had been committed to having a large family when the time was right.

And now she could never have it reversed. She would never have children.

Clinton—that worthless, rat-dropping bastard—had finally managed to take from her every single thing she could have possibly cared about. It had taken him ten thousand years, but he’d done it.

All of this seared through Helen's brain in a heartbeat. Don’t cry, she thought. Don't bitch, don't blame. She handed the little bag back to Josephine and said, “Thank you but...I no need.”

Josephine made a little noise of sympathy, and quickly changed the subject. She gave Helen a list of places in Haven to visit the following day. Finally, she told Helen she had made arrangements to have her meals delivered to the cabin.

Helen thanked her profusely, and Josephine left.

As soon as she was alone, Helen stripped naked and used the new soap and an entire pitcher of water getting herself clean. She was freezing by the end but didn't care. She dressed in clean panties, socks, leggings and a long tunic-type sweater. She sat near the fire and started translating, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” She switched to charcoal after a minute. Using the quill and ink was messy. She didn't know how to get the ink to do what she wanted.

Supper was delivered by the same girl who had dropped supplies all over the floor earlier in the day. She shook so hard that she would have dropped the tray of food as well, had Helen not made a timely intervention.

“Please,” Helen said as gently as she could, using the same tone of voice that she'd once used on freed slaves, “no be afraid of me.”

The girl looked at her like she'd said she planned to eat her. Helen decided not to push it, saying only, “Thank you,” before the girl fled.

Supper was a bland, greasy stew, a hunk of bread, some cheese, hard cider and a small bottle of cold water that had been infused with an herb of some kind. Helen devoured it all. She brushed her teeth, crawled into bed, and quietly sobbed herself to sleep.

**

She woke up in the morning before dawn, her left hand aching.

Servants somewhere must have been waiting for some signal, because literally within five minutes of lighting her first candle, the same girl was knocking on her door with a tray of porridge, cream, dried fruit and hot coffee.

Helen was so happy to see coffee that she thanked the girl enthusiastically in English, before remembering to switch to Common. That got a little smile out of the girl.

Helen ate, cleaned up and dressed in one of Josephine's suggested outfits. She undressed almost immediately and hung it back up in the small wardrobe. Josephine had beautiful taste in clothing, but Helen was not wearing silks to run errands.
She found more normal clothing and a jacket. It wasn't nearly as warm as the furs she'd worn the day before. *Suck it the fuck up and adjust,* she told herself. She grabbed Solas' knife and left her cabin.

She met first with Harritt, the blacksmith. She liked him. He asked her what kind of weapons and armor she needed. Her language skills weren't up to par, but this was a man who understood what his soldiers were doing in the field. She said, “light” and “fast” and “warm. Please, warm.”

Then she showed him what she wanted for close combat—essentially, a retractable dagger that she could keep strapped to her right forearm. It wasn't an omniblade, but it would have to do.

“That’s it?” he said. “No shield? No staff? Just...one dagger?”

She nodded. Harritt frowned. “Look, I s’pose you know wotcher doin’ n all, but leathers and a single dagger won't help you none against a mace to the back of your skull. I know you're a mage...”

“My mage,” Helen said. This was going to get old.

“But if you’re going to fight without a staff,” he said, ignoring her protests, “you need better armor.”

He measured and fussed and grumbled. Then he informed her that she could use this dagger, with that armor for now, but that when she returned from the Hinterlands, she was to come see him at once because he would have her real armor and her real dagger done by then.

She then spent several minutes watching Commander Rutherford, and his Lieutenants train the new recruits. She couldn't comment on sword-and-shield techniques, but *Sweet Baby Jesus.* Some of these FNGs were so green, she expected fingers to start falling into the snow.

The Commander noticed her watching. “Something you need, Herald?” he asked, in an annoyed tone of voice.

She ignored him and walked over to Cassandra, who was beating up some blameless practice dummy. “I saw you talking to Harritt,” Cassandra said. “Tell me what sort of weapon you plan to use.”

“My biotics,” she said, “and dagger.”

“Show me,” Cassandra said. So they spent a few minutes with Cassandra trying to get through her barrier with her sword and then dodging as Helen would strike with the dagger if Cassandra got too close.

“It will do for now,” Cassandra said after a bit. “I suppose we will have plenty of opportunities to test it once we leave.”

Helen nodded and walked back into the village. Her biotics felt good. No, better than good. They felt *amazing.* She desperately wanted to throw a singularity, just to see how wide the radius was, but instinct told her that might not go over well with the locals.

The quartermaster, Threnn, inadvertently taught Helen a racial slur.

“Anyone call you knife-ear, you come to me,” Threnn said to a skinny guy who was wearing work clothes and a knit hat, who carried a bucket and shovel.
After the skinny guy left, Helen introduced herself. Threnn told her about requisitions, explained what her purpose was, and acted as put-upon and irritated as every other non-commissioned officer Helen had ever known.

When their business was concluded, Helen asked, “What 'knife-ear' mean?”

“Are you serious?” Threnn gaped at her as if Helen were having her on. Helen waited patiently for her to recover. “Maker, they said you was from another world but I didn't really believe it. It's an ugly thing that people call elves. It's not polite, got it? So don't go ‘round, sayin’ it yourself.”

Varric stopped her as she walked by, and they talked. She liked him a lot. He was the first person to ask after her mental health, which embarrassingly caused her to tear up. Don't cry, the thought, frantically. Don't cry!

“Hey, now, don't cry on the dwarf,” he said, patting her arm. “I'll just tell lies until you leave.”

It was stupid but it made her giggle. She managed to get out that Josephine had suggested she use his books to learn how to read. “Of course, the Herald of Andraste can use my books to learn how to read. Can I tell my publisher, too?”

After a couple of minutes of joking, she said, “Varric, favor? You please to come Hinterlands with me?”

“What, with you and Cassandra?”

Helen nodded. “Please. Yes.”

“You do realize Cassandra hates me, don't you?”

Yes. “No.”

“Well, she does. But yes, I'll come to the Hinterlands with you. Even though it's, you know, full of the outdoors.”

“Thank you, Varric.”

After lunch in her cabin, she met the alchemist who had kept her hydrated. He had some good suggestions about high-energy drinks she could take on the road. He called them, “restoratives,” but sugar water was sugar water, no matter how bad you made it taste.

Finally, she sought out Solas to return his knife. She knocked on the door of the cabin she'd been told was his. She heard him say, “A moment, please!”

He opened the door a minute later. “Herald,” he said, neutrally. “Good afternoon.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking it back. “How is the mark doing?” he asked.

She shrugged. It ached, but not so much that she felt the need to do anything about it.

He invited her into the cabin so he could look at the mark. They sat at a small table as he inspected her palm.

“Is it causing you any pain?” he asked.

“Some,” she said, “but is...tolerate?”

“Tolerable,” he said. He took her left hand into both of his. A warm pulse ran through her hand, easing the pain somewhat.

She wondered how he did that. Where was he pulling that energy from? How did he direct it through himself and into her? How did that transfer work, in a world without subcutaneous delivery systems or SmartArmor or omnitools?

She didn't realize that he was finished until he gently released her hand, and cleared his throat. “So,” he said. “The Chosen of Andraste, a blessed hero sent to save us all.”

Helen looked up at him, surprised by the bitterness in his tone, and caught him smoothing his face into a neutral mask. But for a moment, his true feelings were plain to see.

“Ah,” she said, “you angry at me, too.” She stood up. “Thank you, Solas, for heal.”

He looked like he was about to say something, but she left before he could.

Helen was suddenly overwhelmed with every ounce of resentment she felt about her circumstances. Don't cry, don't bitch, don't blame, she scolded herself. Especially don't cry. She kept it together, kept her calm, all the way to her cabin.
Chapter ten

Chapter Summary

The journey to the Hinterlands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter ten

Solas watched the Herald hastily retreat from his presence. He sighed; he needed to do a better job reigning in his temper.

Earlier that morning, Leliana had knocked on his door and shared with him what the Herald claimed to be—the daughter of farmers from another world, and a military officer, who had drifted through the stars for thousands of years.

“Do you believe her?” he asked.

“No,” she said quickly. Then she hesitated, and added, “Well, not yet. It is odd. When she speaks, I do believe her. Then I think about what she has just said, and I get angry with myself for entertaining such nonsense.” She left not long after that, looking troubled and uncertain.

The rumors in Haven were flying fast and thick. The Herald was an abomination. The Herald was a simple farmer's daughter. The Herald was an evil mage who used blood magic. The Maker himself had pulled the Herald from the heavens to save them all.

Then the subject of all the speculation showed up, unannounced, to return his knife.

He found himself disappointed that she had done so. His task was complicated enough already. It would be much easier if the Herald were petty and selfish, or even just thoughtless.

Perhaps that was why he had been unable to maintain his simple apostate facade when she sat so trustingly in his presence, her hand in his, and oblivious to the meaning the mark held for him.

“You angry at me, too,” she'd said.

And he honestly had been. Seeing the Anchor nestled in the palm of a mortal, of a human...it rankled. She'd fled before he'd had a chance to say anything else.

_Do not forget, not even for a single moment, where the fault lies_, he scolded himself. Even if she shared some of the blame, even if she had been working with Corypheus the entire time, alienating the woman would make his task even more impossible than it already was.

One of his agents—Telina, the servant girl assigned to the Herald—stopped by later that afternoon.

“What have you observed?” he asked.
“She's an odd one, Messere. Ambassador Montilyet is trying to teach her how to read and write the Common. And she's a bit fussy, honestly, washing her hands all the time.”

“Interesting. What else?”

“She didn't know how to bank the fire, or light the lamp.”

“She is human,” he pointed out. “Perhaps she is accustomed to having servants do those tasks for her.”

“No, Messere, that's just it. I don't think she's used to having servants at all. She made her own bed this morning. She changed her outfit at least once but hung the clothing back up. And she keeps thanking me.”

He took a couple of coppers out of his pouch. “Anything else?”

She hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward as if she were about to reveal something truly scandalous. “I heard that she asked the quartermaster what 'knife-ear' meant. She'd never heard it before! And that Threnn had to explain it to her! Can you imagine!”

And when her eyes met his, he realized that this infant expected him to feel a connection with her over this. So he shook his head, as if he, too, found it amusing. He handed her the coppers, saying, “Thank you. We will meet again tomorrow?”

“If you like, but the Herald is leaving for the Hinterlands in the morning, with the Seeker and Master Tethras.”

“I see. When she returns, then.”

The girl left.

He pondered his options, then headed towards the Herald's cabin, and knocked on her door.

Her eyebrows went up when she saw him. “So-las?”

“My apologies, Herald, but I wondered if we might speak for a moment.”

Her gaze was disconcerting as if she was trying to look into him. After a moment, she opened the door wide enough to allow him to come inside.
She gestured him to her small table, where her supper awaited. It was simple fare—meat, bread,
butter, cheese.

“Herald, I wanted to--”

She raised a hand, to stop him from going any further. She pulled a chair out for him, inviting him to sit.

Curious, he sat. She opened a bottle of hard cider and poured him a glass. Then she took everything she'd been given to eat, and began to divide it evenly among the plates.

“Herald, this is not necessary,” he said as soon as he realized that she intended to feed him half of her own dinner.

She handed him a plate, anyway, and the only fork. Then she began eating herself, using her fingers, the knife and a spoon.

He sipped on the cider, bemused at her actions. He'd only stopped by to offer her a quick apology, and (more importantly) to suggest that she take him with her to the Hinterlands. Now he was staring down at a plate of food he did not want but could not, in politeness, refuse.

“I wanted to apologize for my tone earlier today,” he said. “The Breach has us all on edge, but I should not have taken it out on you.”

She shrugged. “Eat, Solas.”

Giving in to the situation, he pulled out his own knife and started to smear some butter on his bread. “I hear you are traveling to the Hinterlands with Cassandra and Varric.”

She met his eyes and nodded. “You want go,” she guessed.

“I should go,” he corrected. “We face a bloody conflict. You will need a mage with you.”

The Herald gave him another long, searching look. “You soldier, Solas?”

“If you only knew. “A long time ago, yes.”

“You from Ferelden?” She hesitated in her pronunciation—Fer-el-den—as if she was still testing out the word on her tongue. The question was innocent enough, but it led to a subject he needed to avoid. Time to redirect the conversation.

“Are you from Ferelden,’ is the proper way to ask that question. I understand the Ambassador is giving you language lessons.”

The Herald wiped her mouth with her napkin, went over to her desk, and brought back an inkwell, a quill, a stick of charcoal, and some paper.

The paper had writing on it already. In an unsteady hand, and written in smeared charcoal, it said, 
twinkle twinkle tiny star, how I wondering what you are.

She pointed to the quill and ink. “I no use before,” she said. “Is messy.”

“You know how to read and write,” Solas said carefully, “but not how to use a quill and ink.”

“Yes,” she said, seemingly relieved to hear him say it.

He showed her how to sharpen the nib, load the ink, clean the quill and make her marks. As they
worked, he discreetly put the food she had given him back on her plate. After an hour, she had eaten everything and had written her own primer for upper and lower case Common.

He excused himself after that, saying he would see her at sunrise to head to the Hinterlands. “Thank you, So-las,” she said, touching the paper.

“It is no trouble,” he told her, and he took his leave. *Fen'Harel*, he thought, on the way back to his cabin. *Betrayor of Worlds. The Dread Wolf. He Who Hunts Alone. Also, Teaches Penmanship on the Side.*

**

Their first day on the road, the Herald insisted that all of them understand what she was doing with her own magic. "You need know, Varric," she said, getting a bit aggravated when the dwarf got bored and tuned her out. "Battle too late for learn."

Her primary spells—and he did not fail to notice that she winced when he referred to them as such—were Pull, Throw, Singularity, Warp, and Stasis. She indicated that she had others but did not elaborate.

She was a competent horsewoman, but only just, and not used to long days in the saddle. She never asked him to heal her saddle pain. Since it was not life-threatening, he did not offer it.

She was fastidious in her habits, keeping her hands, face, and teeth clean by what appeared to be long-ingrained routine. Their campsites were neat and orderly.

He and Cassandra would spar with her in the evenings. She had experience with hand to hand combat, but the reach of Cassandra’s sword and Solas’ quarterstaff confused her. Even with her barrier up, it was not difficult at first to throw her off balance.

“What sort of weapons are you used to facing?” Solas asked her.

“Like Varric,” she said, “but not really.”

“Range weapons?” Cassandra asked, “Like bows and arrows?”

The Herald had flipped her hand back and forth. “Close enough.”

Cassandra frowned and glanced at Solas. He knew they were thinking the same thing, but he let the Seeker ask it.

“If you do not carry a shield,” Cassandra asked, “and you do not wear heavy armor, how do you protect yourself from enemy fire?”

What followed was one of the many conversations with the Herald where her language skills proved inadequate. She would begin a sentence, then mutter to herself in her own language. Then Solas and the others would eventually make suggestions which were nearly always wrong.

Finally, she handed Solas a rock, walked away several paces and turned her back to him. “Throw gentle,” she ordered.

He tossed the rock at her back. It hit her on the back and bounced off.

She handed it back to him. “Throw hard,” she said, as she turned her back again.

He put some force behind it. Her barrier jumped into place just as the rock would have touched her
“It is autonomous,” he said, surprised.

“Not foolproof,” she said, touching her right wrist, “but better than nothing.”

It was like everything else about her magic—beautiful, elegant, and disturbing. There was nothing of the Fade in it, at all. Nothing. Seeing her use it was like walking into a crowded room, only to realize that you had suddenly gone deaf.

And although he knew her magic used the energy from her own body, he had not appreciated what that meant until he’d had to listen to her munch on trail mix morning, noon and night. In his less charitable moments, it reminded him of a horse.

The Herald still struggled to speak the Common. It was a source of frustration for all of them. He watched her try—and fail—to place complicated concepts into words that the others could understand.

Her habit of muttering to herself under her breath when she was trying to find the right word was, quite honestly, extremely off-putting. At best, it sounded rude. At worst, she sounded mad or possessed.

When he explained that to the Herald, to his surprise, he received full-throated support from both Cassandra and Varric.

“The sooner you learn our language, the better,” Solas said. “For now, let us focus on the basics.”

So she did. She asked a lot of questions. “What kind tree this is? What names of moons? What day this is? What is that? What is this?”

After a few days, the questions became more interesting. One morning, not long after they had broken camp and were on the road, the Herald pointed to Cassandra, Varric, and Solas, in turn, and said. "Human. Elf. Dwarf."

Varric and Solas exchanged a look. That sort of statement was often the prelude to a human saying something profoundly ignorant.

“Why all different?” she asked.

A confused silence met her question. “What do you mean, Herald?” Cassandra asked.

Helen closed her eyes for a moment as she gathered her thoughts. “To me,” she said slowly, then she indicated all of them with a circle of her hand, “in my world, no elf, dwarf, human. All human.”

“The elves in your world are considered to be human?” Solas asked.

“No elves in my world,” Helen said.

“At all?” Solas said.

“No.”

“What about dwarves?” Varric asked.

“Dwarves rare but human. Not separate.”
“Adversity between the races goes back for generations,” Solas started, but the Herald interrupted him.

“I no mean politics, So-las,” she said. “I mean...biology.”

Solas bit back his retort about being interrupted, grasping that she was not trying to offend, only to learn. “Ask what you will,” he said.

“Human and elf can have child?”

“Such pairings are not favored socially, and you will need to be educated on the reasons why,” Solas said seriously, “but yes, it is possible. Biologically, such children are considered human.”

“Human and dwarf?”

“Not exactly common,” Varric said. “Dwarves tend to be pretty clannish. But yeah, it's possible. You'd get a really tall dwarf or a really short human. Like you, actually. Hey, was one of your parents a dwarf?” Solas could just imagine what an author like Varric would do with such information.

“No,” she smiled. “I just short. What about dwarf and elf?”

“Rarer still,” Solas said, suppressing a shudder at the very thought. “Genetically, the child would be a dwarf.”

“And all these children, they can have children, too?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Thank you,” she said, looking thoughtful.

Later that day, as they rode, she pulled her horse up next to his, and asked, “So-las, I ask question?”

“May you ask a question, Herald” he corrected. “And yes, you may ask.”

“What is magic?”

“You really jump right in with the big questions, don't you?” Varric said.

Solas ignored the dwarf. “Magic is a force which runs through all living things in Thedas,” he said. “Everybody is touched by it. Only mages, however, can manipulate it to their will.”

“But what is it?” she persisted.

“Magic is magic,” Solas said. “It isn't a thing. It simply is.”

Her brows were furrowed together. “Where it come from?”

“Where does it come from. The primary source of magic is the Fade.”

She held up her left hand. “This is from Fade.”

“Use your articles, please, Herald.”

That got a very, very tiny ghost of a smile. “What is the Fade, So-las?”

He answered her questions for the rest of the day. He explained about the Veil. He explained about
the Fade. He told her about the different schools of magic. He told her about spirits.

Cassandra interjected with Chantry-biased nonsense about demons. This devolved into a long and spirited discussion between himself and the Seeker on the nature of spirits.

Although he would not concede any ground where spirits were concerned, he did defer to the Seeker’s greater knowledge of anti-magic. The entire day passed by so quickly for him that he was surprised when it was time to stop, and set up camp.

That evening, after supper, the Herald sat at the campfire and practiced her letters. Solas took a few moments to observe her as he walked the perimeter.

She had pushed her hood back and stared so longingly up at the night sky that Solas almost felt like offering her comfort, or sympathy.

The Herald reached for her right wrist, then aborted the movement. She quietly packed her things away and went to bed.

He looked for her that night, in the Fade, but found nothing. Ah, well. It was a relief, really.

**

They were still a few days out from the Hinterlands when they ran into the slavers.

It happened on the high roads, southwest of Lake Calenhad. Cassandra and Varric had been bickering, as usual, when the Herald suddenly hissed out a short command in her own language and snapped up a closed fist.

Solas had heard it, too. People weeping, crying out for help. The creak of wagons, and the threats of slavers.

The Herald slipped off her horse and bellycrawled to the edge of the cliff. Solas and the others did the same.

There, on the lower road some 20 meters down, were two wagons—wheeled cages, more like—carrying captives, many of whom were women and children, and all of whom were modern alienage elves. There were eight slavers on horseback.

“We will attempt a rescue,” Casandra said quietly, as they pushed back from the edge and stood up, “but they will see us coming. I suggest--”

“Cover me,” the Herald said. Then she took a running leap off the cliff.

Solas and Varric cursed, pulling their weapons out from behind them, as the Herald hurtled towards the ground. Her biotics flared blue as she landed in a crouch, and chaos erupted all around her.

Cassandra jumped back on her horse and galloped down the switchback. “You think that's one of those moves she didn't tell us about?” Varric yelled as he shot Bianca into the fray. “I really think she should have mentioned jumping off cliffs.”

The Herald placed the wagons and their horses into a stasis field, to prevent the captives from being injured. Her Singularity swept three slavers off of their horses. Their mounts ran off from underneath them. The Herald flicked her hand towards the trapped men. An explosion killed them all.
Three other horses also ran off riderless, their owners having been thrown up to the feet of Varric and Solas, who quickly dispatched them.

Another man was launched so violently into the air, it looked like he'd been released from a trebuchet. No man could fall from that height and survive.

Only one slaver remained. The Herald pulled him to herself, snarled at him in her own language, then plunged her dagger into his chest. He died just as Cassandra joined her.

Solas and Varric hurried down as quickly as they could, along with their horses.

The Herald stood at the front of the wagons, which were still in her stasis field. She grabbed the reins of one horse attached to a wagon. Solas grabbed the other.

As soon as she released the stasis field, the horses tried to bolt. The captives released the terrorized screams that the stasis field had prevented. Solas and the Herald calmed the horses enough to keep the carts from overturning.

The captives were terrified of the Herald, who seemed to take it in stride. She spoke calmly in her own tongue, which of course, not one single person understood.

“Varrie?” she said, loud and slow. “You find keys, yes? Unlock, please?”

She looked at an older woman, who seemed the calmest, but also the angriest. “Apology,” the Herald told her. “No hurt your people. No want frighten but...” she looked around at the dead slavers, then a bit helplessly at Solas.

“What the Herald is trying to say,” Solas supplied, as Varric started unlocking the cages, “is that we had to act quickly once we saw your situation. It was not our intention to scare you. Only to free you.”

“So, what now,” said the angry woman. “You going to take us captive, too? Expect us to work off our gratitude?”

“No,” said Cassandra. “We sought only to free you, and to help in whatever way we can.”

“A Seeker!” said the elven woman. “Thank the Maker.” And it was that—the appearance of a person who shared their Andrastian heritage—that finally convinced the captives that they were safe.

The elves were artisans from the alienage in Redcliffe. They had been trading in Gwaren when the Breach appeared, so they cut their trip short. On their way back home, they were captured by the slavers, who put their menfolk to the sword. None of them knew where they were being taken, although they had been heading steadily west.

Word of the Inquisition had not yet reached them. Cassandra's terse description of what they were trying to do seemed to cause Varric pain. “Seeker,” he said, rolling his eyes, “never go into sales.”

They made camp. The captives were subdued, as they began to process the traumas they had endured. Many wept. Solas tended to the wounds of the few elves willing to be touched by magic. Varric told the children stories.
Most of the slaver's horses eventually wandered back to them. Solas and Cassandra went through the animals' packs and tack. “They were heading to Orlais,” Solas said, reading the crudely written contract before handing it to Cassandra.

“Too many Orlesian nobles refuse to accept that slavery is illegal,” Cassandra said. “I will make sure Leliana knows what happened here.”

The Herald, meanwhile, quickly and quietly dismantled the cages, using her magic to crumple the iron down into scrap. She moved the slavers' bodies a discreet distance away, before stripping them of weapons and armor.

Cassandra spoke with the survivors about getting back to the Hinterlands safely. It was decided that the elves would take the carts, the scrap, the Inquisition's horses and all but four of the slavers' horses to the nearest scouting camp. The Herald and her party would continue on their way with the slavers' horses, as they were marginally better than the Inquisition mounts. Cassandra wrote out missives, which placed the elves under the protection of the Inquisition.

The elves studiously ignored both the Herald and Solas. Solas tried not to let it bother him, but it did. It bothered him to no end that the elves were terrified of magic. It should have been their birthright.

“So-las,” the Herald interrupted his thoughts. He looked up from the fire to find her squatting next to him. “Please to help?”

“You burn, please?” she asked him.

“Bodies don't burn well on their own,” he pointed out. “Not without a fuel source.” Once that would not have been true, and he could have turned the bodies to ash with just a thought.

“Burn please, So-las,” she said. He sighed and lit the bodies on fire. She held a tight barrier over the entire mess, causing the pile of smoldering bodies to superheat. Within a couple of minutes, there was nothing left but a smear of greasy soot.

“Remarkable,” he said. When her language skills were better developed, they were going to have a long discussion about exactly how her magic worked.

She started to head back to camp, but Solas stopped her. He was curious about how this looked to her eyes. “Does it bother you, that the people you just rescued are terrified of you?”

She looked at him knowingly. “Think it bother you, So-las.”

“Of course it bothers me,” he said. “They shun the person that granted their freedom. They run towards a system that offers them nothing but oppression and grief.”

The Herald, damn her, only shrugged, acceptance in her expression. “Their choice, So-las. I free them, they choose. I no like choice? I free anyway.”

Solas realized two things at that moment.

First, the Herald was indeed from another world. No servant of Corypheus would willingly rescue elves from slavery. No Thedosian would even question why humans, elves, and dwarves were considered different. No magic had been seen like hers before, not in this age or any other. Saying
she was a liar, or mad, or anything else did not explain everything about her as thoroughly as her being from another world.

Second, real or not, the Herald was fascinating. He had been surprised more often in the last week of travel than he had in centuries. For all the reasons he needed to be here, he now had one reason he wanted to be here.

“You have done this before,” he said. “Rescued slaves.”

“Yes.”

“Cassandra will likely be upset with you,” he warned, “not for the rescue itself, but because you did it in a way that placed yourself most at risk.”


He turned back towards camp. “I believe you mean to say, ‘I was not in any danger.’”

“I was not in much danger,” she said, as she followed.

“Better, although I suggest using my version when speaking to Cassandra.”

Chapter End Notes

Both of my betas deserve enormous thanks for this chapter. They help me with every chapter, but this one underwent more than a couple of rewrites.

A couple of readers have asked about my update schedule. I have been able to post a new chapter every few days because I wrote the first several chapters last year before Andromeda came out. I could not move the story forward in the way I wanted, so it sat on my hard drive. Then I played Andromeda, and the story was re-born as Half-Life.

Anyway, those early chapters have all been rewritten and posted. I’m now uploading and writing the post-Andromeda material. The storyline gets more complicated with each chapter. And I have a full-time job, as do my betas. I will update as often as I can but three chapters a week is not likely to be a thing anymore.

UPDATE: The amazing http://padme4000.tumblr.com/ has created a fantastic rendered painting of Helen using her biotics, which I added to the chapter. It is stunning. You should go to her tumblr and check out her work.

And thank you, everybody, for all of the comments, reviews, and kudos. I love love love feedback.
Chapter eleven

Chapter Summary

Helen gets to the Crossroads in the Hinterlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter eleven

Helen had been nineteen years old, the first time she'd killed somebody.

It wasn't even a real battle. Her unit had been training on New Canton. She was off-duty and waiting for her friends at a sleazy little bar in the colony's only spaceport. A couple of intoxicated Batarians, unhappy with their high tab, were arguing with the Salarian bartender.

Then one of them pulled out a pistol and shot the bartender right between the eyes.

“The Hegem'ny's hereby d'clares war on the Counshul!” he slurred, as his friend drunkenly fumbled for his weapon.

Helen, who had at the end of the bar staring at the front door, hit them with Singularity and Warp. The Batarians died instantly, covering the bar in gore.

A few hours later, her Gunnery Chief, a gruff old bird from the Congolese Republic, found Helen alternately sobbing and puking her guts up in the head. “You'll get a promotion for this,” she said, handing Helen a bottle of water and a washcloth, “and a lot of people will hate you for it.”

“I don't want a promotion for this,” Helen had protested. “I didn't want to kill anybody!”

“Doesn't matter what you want. You took responsibility. That means being responsible. Don't cry, don't bitch, don't blame.”

She had, indeed, received a promotion, but she'd also faced an informal inquiry within the Alliance. Years later, she'd learned that the Hegemony had hoped to use the incident as political fodder until they saw the video. Gunning down a skinny, unarmed Salarian, only to die at the hands of a skinny, unarmed human, was, "bad optics."

Private Trevelyan had taken her Gunnery Chief's advice to heart, as she moved through the Alliance ranks. It had been one of the ways she had coped with the fallout from Clinton (the others included ice cream, sparring, and knitting).

Taking responsibility was on her mind a lot now, as she traveled with Cassandra, Varric, and Solas. Helen was the de facto leader of their group.

Not that the other three were begging for the job.

Cassandra might have been one of the leaders of the Inquisition, but she let Helen set the pace. Helen wondered what would happen when their group first saw combat.
It certainly wasn't Varric. He was a businessman, he said, and nothing more. She didn't buy that for one second, but still—running the show was not what he wanted. “I'm not leading anything, except a Merchant's Guild meeting. Actually...not even that.”

It *should* have been Solas, at least in Helen's opinion, but for reasons unclear to her, it was not. She'd once worked with a Captain, who'd been busted down to Specialist Third Class for a stretch after he'd done something he shouldn't have. Instead of issuing orders, he'd suddenly had to follow them.

Solas had that look, too—like he was swallowing words, and didn't like the taste.

He'd mentioned he'd once been a soldier, so why wasn't he part of the army here? Had he been in a different country's military? Dishonorably discharged? Was it because he was a mage? Or was it the elf thing? The politics and personalities of the situation were still rather beyond her.

Whatever the opinions of her companions might be, Helen was still in charge of a small ground team of three near-strangers, who looked to her to fix something she had neither caused nor understood.

*Don't cry*, she told herself. *Don't bitch. Don't blame.*

She was glad to put Haven behind her. It was freezing cold. She barely spoke the language. She was on horseback for the first time in over fifteen years, which meant several long days of discomfort.

But on the road, her companions did not act like her every move terrified them. And god almighty, it smelled *infinitely* better.

Another reason she liked leaving Haven was that she could *finally* stretch her biotics. Their first day out, she showed her companions what she did in the field, partly so they would know, and partly because she'd wanted to see if her biotics were as strong as she suspected.

Like most of the human biotics in the Initiative, Helen had received an L-5 implant and had been required to undergo a few weeks of training. The L-5 had made her biotics faster, and more adaptable, but not stronger.

But this? What she was doing now with barely a thought was what she saw from Asari Commandos.

*Don't get cocky*, she told herself. *Cocky means dead.* Whatever her powers were, nothing would kill her faster than ignorance.

And her ignorance of this planet was profound. It felt like she'd been thrown into a lake, and the only way to avoid drowning was to drink it all.

So, she asked questions. She asked for training. She worked on her letters. She worked on her language skills.

Days were all right. Cassandra was a woman of few words but always answered Helen's questions.

Varric only offered his opinion on most topics if asked directly, but he was more than happy to tell stories.

Solas, on the other hand, seemed to relish the role of teaching. For a man who held himself in such reserve, he became positively garrulous when asked about a topic he knew a lot about.
Nights were harder. The Breach made stargazing impossible. (Silly, she knew, but she wanted to see where she was.) She missed the hum of ship engines. Her body ached from horseback riding. She was having horrible dreams. She missed her omnitool. She missed bathing.

She was intensely lonely.

But as she watched her companions for a couple of days, she wondered if they were all lonely, too. Cassandra, Varric, and Solas answered her questions readily enough, but they didn't talk to each other much.

It was one of the reasons she asked them about the differences between humans, dwarves, and elves. She wanted to see what they would say. Their reactions were interesting.

Varric had the sort of guarded-but-relaxed body language that said, “not my thing, but fine for other people.” He wouldn't be up for a relationship with a non-dwarf, but he wouldn't shame anybody else about it, either.

Solas had turned pale and had clutched his reins so tightly that his knuckles turned white. His speech may have been polite, but his real feelings on non-elves were pretty clear.

Cassandra had said nothing at all but had looked wistful.

Still, what she heard tended to support her belief that people on Thedas were all *homo sapiens sapiens*, whether they liked it or not. They could reproduce, and their offspring could reproduce.

But this was not the time to argue about anything. It was just food for thought.

**

Helen thought about responsibility again the day they ran into the slavers.

The second she'd seen the slavers wagons, she knew she could handle it on her own. Her primary objective was to keep the captives safe while she neutralized eight hostiles, who were inadequately armed and unprepared for anything like Helen's biotics.

So, she'd acted. The captives were terrified of her, but that was all right. She'd learned long ago that victims often view their rescue as part of the trauma they have endured. Helen gave them their space, and let Cassandra be the source of familiar comfort.

Solas' warning that Cassandra would be angry was an accurate one. Cassandra had chewed her ass out.

Helen had been polite, but uninterested. “I saw need, I do it,” she said, clumsily parroting Cassandra's own words back to her. “You understand this.”

Cassandra had glared, but she looked Helen with a new shine of respect. “Yes,” she said. “I do.”

**

It took a few more days to get to the Crossroads. One entire day was spent on the topic of the Blight, which was some sort of recurring plague vector that altered the course of history whenever it appeared.

The only way to stop a Blight involved the Gray Wardens. She learned that the armor she currently wore had once belonged to a Gray Warden, although hers had been re-purposed.
“Is disease?” she asked. Sort of, except that it also tainted water, crops, and soil. “Is contagious?” Yes, and fighting darkspawn put one at great risk. “What is darkspawn?”

Husks. There was a lot more to it than that, but that was the long and short of it. It was like a disease that turned animals and people into husks.

“What is cause?” Nobody seemed to know. The primary religion blamed evil mages who had trespassed on the Holiest of Holies.

Or something like that. She cared more about learning the language than she did about religion, so a lot of the discussion went over her head. The parts she did understand sounded like nonsense. She listened to Varric and Cassandra debate the topic and kept her opinions to herself.

She was extremely proud of herself for never once asking, “Did anybody ever try washing their hands?”

Solas didn't have much to say, either. She wondered if he, too, found the local religion to be mostly bullshit.

That night after supper, she opened one of Varric's books. “Read it aloud,” Solas sniffed. “If the Inquisition is to be taken seriously, its Herald should speak complete sentences.”

He had a point. Helen opened the book and began reading. “The...Tale of the Cham...Champion. By Varric Tethras. Chap..Chapter One. Once upon a...blight, in a town called...Lo-ther-ing...”

It took her an hour just to get through half a chapter, but the language did feel easier on her tongue.

“This good idea,” she teased. Solas glowered at her. “This is a good idea,” she corrected. “We can do this again tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Cassandra said quickly, before glancing at Varric, who had a shit-eating grin on his face. Cassandra frowned sternly at the fire, but there was no hiding the blush on her face. “I mean, only if you wish to, Herald.”

**

Helen didn't know what to expect at the Crossroads, but after speaking with Scout Harding, she thought it would be like an unruly protest. Or maybe a riot. Perhaps some looting. Nothing that wouldn't be solved by the Inquisition going in and busting a few heads.

She was not expecting a wholesale slaughter. The mages and Templars were killing each other, the civilians, and any livestock within reach.

In just a few heartbeats, Helen saw a Templar, in heavy mail, slice off the heads of two screaming boys as they clutched the scorched body of their mother. She saw a mage kill a Chantry sister who was trying to carry an ancient, wounded farmer to safety. Then the mage lit the wheezing farmer on fire, apparently just for sport.

She heard Cassandra and Solas shout to both sides, either side, any side to please just stand down—only to find themselves out of breath a moment later in defense of their own lives.

Helen was quietly, calmly and thoroughly furious. She flicked a barrier over her people, then zeroed in on the most significant threats.

The spellbinder who killed nuns and old men? Snapped neck. The giant Templar that needed heavy
weapons to kill 6-year-olds? Crushed to death by his own armor.
She Pulled archers down the sides of mountains. Her Singularities tripped Templars and confused mages. She ordered Varric to cover the road that led to the mountain pass. She asked Solas to shield fleeing civilians. She sent Cassandra after a Templar who chased a screaming woman.

She didn't Throw anyone into the sky, but only because this was a populated area and she didn't know where they'd land.

It took most of the afternoon to clear the Crossroads of combatants. When it was finally done, she and her team stood, exhausted, in a burned-out field.

Not one single building stood undamaged; crops, gardens and food stores were ruined. Bodies lay everywhere—mages, templars, women, children, men, clerics, and sisters. Helen was willing to bet good credits that the Crossroads had a higher population of dead than living.

Helen fished a restoration potion from her pouch and drank it. “If this is your planet's idea of a holy war,” she said, angrily and in English, “your Maker can shove it up his ass sideways.” Not one of her companions bothered to ask what she'd just said.

Inquisition soldiers moved in to help secure the area. A scout saw her, ran over, and saluted.


He told her where to find Mother Giselle, where to find the Corporal in charge of reconstruction, where the Inquisition might set up some camps, and likely places to start looking for the rebel mages and Templar strongholds.

She took in all of the information. “Thank you,” she nodded. “Dismissed.”

She closed her eyes for a moment to gather her thoughts. She opened them to find all of her companions looking at her expectantly.

“I know all tired but need help people. Solas, is heal for people possible?” Her grammar was backsliding, but she was too tired to care.

“Certainly,” he said.

“Good man,” she said, clapping him on the shoulder as he walked past her, and over to where the healers had set up.

“Cassandra, Varric, find what people need, please? Report back. Then we help.”

She made her way to Mother Giselle. The nun was both kind and shrewd. She laid out for Helen a blatantly political suggestion: go to Val Royeaux, and sow dissent among what was left of the Chantry hierarchy. At best, she would gain allies. At worst, it would buy her some time while the mothers bickered among themselves. Helen thanked the woman, who said she would head back to Haven.

Dusk was approaching. She gathered her companions.

They, along with a handful of Inquisition scouts, made camp near a gentle waterfall. It allowed (with cooperation) everybody just enough privacy to bathe.

She let her companions and the scouts bathe first, while she checked the camp, cleaned her armor,
and washed a change of clothes (which Solas was kind enough to dry with a spell). She finally took
her soap, her towel, and the clean clothes, and made her way to the waterfall.

The water was cold, but Helen didn’t care. She stood under the fall and let her mind blank out for a
few minutes. Then she picked up the soap and scrubbed away ten days of travel and combat.

Being clean—truly clean—vastly improved her mood. After supper, she read another chapter of,
“Tale of the Champion” out loud, which caused the scouts to realize that the dwarf with the giant
crossbow was, in fact, the most famous author in all of Thedas. Varric spent the rest of the evening
soaking up the attention from his adoring fans.

Before she turned in for the night, Helen looked over her camp. Varric was gently teasing the
Seeker in front of the other Scouts. The Scouts were deferential towards Helen but avoided making
eye contact with her.

Solas was sitting alone, at the edge of camp, writing in a journal. Helen made her way over
towards him.

“Solas,” she said quietly, as she knelt next to him, “I want to thank you.”

He stopped writing and raised his eyes to her. “For?”

She spoke carefully, so as not to leave out any articles or verbs. “For healing those people. For
helping me to speak, and to write. For answering all my questions. For everything.”

He tipped his head just a bit, and while he wasn't exactly smiling, his eyes had softened. "You are
quite welcome."

Helen started to leave, but he said, “You did well today.”

“Thank you, but I not...I did not do it alone.”

“Leaders never do, Herald,” he said. “but it takes more to make a peace than simply soldiers.”

She knelt back down. Did he have more advice to give? She’d take it. “You speak from experience,
Solas?”

It was the wrong thing to say. His eyes went cold again as he looked down at his paper. “Yes,” he
said shortly. “Good night, Herald.”
Many thanks are in order (again, as always, and forever) for my betas. They really kept me in line with this chapter. Truly amazing people, the both of them.

And holy smokes, this story is on the front "kudos" page with the "Cullen Rutherford/Original Character" tag. Thank you, everybody, so much for reading and supporting Helen's story.
Chapter twelve

Chapter Summary

The Herald and her ground team travel the Hinterlands. Solas learns he does not always work and play well with others. Solas POV.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twelve

At the Herald's decision, they spent the next few weeks in the Hinterlands. She viewed closing the rifts and stopping the warring factions from fighting to be roughly equal in urgency.

Each morning, the “ground team,” (a term of the Herald's that he rather liked) would head towards the nearest “hot spot,” (that term, less so) and solve whatever problems they faced along the way.

Solas, for the first time in millennia, found himself surrounded by people who simply took him at face value. He wasn't Fen' Harel, to be feared, or flattered, or cursed. Nor did he find himself cast in his more recent role of flat-eared madman, to be run through for the high crime of correcting the accepted history.

Here, in this moment, he was simply Solas the mage. And while he would never view his companions as true equals, he could admit to himself that it was quite nice to be treated as one.

His off-the-cuff remark that the Herald read Varric's book out loud had been, as many of his ideas were, inspired. It raised difficult topics in a natural way, giving him the perfect opportunity to influence the Herald's view on subjects important to him.

The chapter which introduced the apostate Anders triggered a two-day discussion about possession, the Circles, the Chantry, the Rite of Tranquility, and the ethics of the Grey Wardens.

The Herald seemed especially troubled by the idea of possession. “So...the spirit lives in the person?” she said slowly.

“Pretty much,” Varric said.

“Could it be madness? The mage is delusion?”


She thought about it for a long moment. “No demons in my world, so no possession.”

“Are there spirits or demons of any kind?” Solas asked.

“No magic, no Fade, no spirits, no demons.”

“But your magic,” Cassandra began.
The Herald let out frustrated, “ugh!” before saying, “My biotics are not magic. It is physics, Cassandra.”

Cassandra went silent but the look on her face made it clear she did not believe the Herald.

Solas, on the other hand, did believe her. He had observed her extremely closely over the last few weeks. Demons were dangerous not because they could harm you physically, but because they could harm you emotionally. The stronger the demon, the harder it was to resist the emotion it embodied.

Indeed, Cassandra and Varric were effective against demons in part because Cassandra's training as a Seeker, and Varric's genetic heritage as a Dwarf, gave them both at least partial immunity to a demon's emotional manipulations.

Yet the Herald treated demons as she had any other hostiles they'd encountered. To her they were all simply corporeal enemies that needed to be defeated.

Solas had listened to her magic, and it was silent. He had looked for her in the Fade, and found nothing, except for the Anchor itself. Even Cassandra and Varric had a life force that the Fade recognized. But not the Herald.

And he pitied her. Truly, he did. She was like a golem that the durgen'len once made. She unquestionably had intelligence and purpose, but she lacked a real soul.

“Does it hurt?” the Herald asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Pardon?”

“Does possession hurt?” she repeated.

“In the end, it often hurts both parties,” Solas said. “A spirit embodies a single emotion, but any person is far more complicated than that.”

The Herald was quiet for a moment. “Spirit stretches too large, and person squeezes too small?”

“An oversimplification, perhaps, but not inaccurate,” Solas said, “although it would sound pithier if you used your articles.”

That got a hint of a smile out of her until Cassandra began arguing. "Solas, you speak as though it is only beneficent spirits and good people who agree to join together. You must concede that most are demons joining with people looking for personal gain."

“I concede no such thing,” Solas said. He and Cassandra spent another hour arguing about the nature of spirits and demons.

“Anders did a noble thing, trying to save the life of Justice,” Solas argued.

“And now all of Thedas is paying for it,” Cassandra retorted.

“The road to hell,” said the Herald.

“Beg pardon?” Varric asked. “The road to what?”

“Is a saying in my world. 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'”

Solas was so struck by her words that he remained silent for the rest of the afternoon.
On Thedas, most people would look at one's ears, or height, or clothing before deciding how much attention one deserved.

The Herald did none of that. She looked everybody straight in the eye. It made many uncomfortable, but it also meant that they were less inclined to lie or to withhold information.

Some of things she did earned her, if not exactly love, then at least respect from the Inquisition soldiers and scouts. Weapons, armor and any other equipment they found was given to the Inquisition or her ground team. She, however, continued to wear the old Grey Warden armor that she'd worn since leaving Haven. She helped the locals find food, shelter, and medicine. She encouraged Inquisition troops to take immediate action to solve problems, without waiting for permission first.

On the other hand, she demanded a level of hygiene in the Inquisition camps that many of the soldiers resented, although Corporal Vale liked to point out to anybody who would listen that the camps were some of the only disease-free places in the Hinterlands.

She also brooked no prejudice among the Inquisition rank and file. She broke up an argument one morning in an Inquisition camp. A scrum had broken out among half-a-dozen young recruits. The camp was awakened to shouts of "fucking nug-humper!" and "filthy shem!" and "knife-ear slattern!"

The Herald shouted at them in her own language. Nobody understood her words but she was so loud, and her biotics flared so menacingly around her hands, that all the recruits shut up and stood at attention.

"That woman, those men," she pointed at Cassandra, Solas, and Varric, "they my ground-team. You think we act like this? No!"

She told the wayward recruits that they were now “Company Half-Wit.” She informed the ranking Corporal that the Company Half-Wit would now do everything together, starting with digging out new latrines.

As they rode away, Cassandra said, "I know that things are different in your world, Herald, but I do not believe that calling those soldiers 'Company Half-Wit' will improve morale."

"Oh, I don't know. It improved mine," Varric stated.

“And we get new latrines,” said the Herald.

She also continued to ask about Thedas, although her questions were becoming more complicated now that she was she had become more fluent. The questions she asked often took him by surprise. For example, when he first explained enchantments to her (they had found a ring of staggering on a dead Templar) she asked, “Does enchantment use energy from the object? Or is it energy added to the object?”

"Both," Solas said, unable to hide his surprise at her insight. He was so delighted with her questions, that he placed a frost enchantment on her dagger, just for the pleasure of showing her how it worked.

Still, for all of her leadership abilities and her singular curiosity, she was, by nature, a contemplative woman. Her smiles were rare, small things. She asked many questions but did not speak just for the sake of talking. She was not one to fill up a silence.
In short, the bearer of his Anchor was a competent, inquisitive, and deeply serious woman. Logically, he knew that he should be grateful that she was not going to misuse his power for her own gain, and that she was trying to improve the world around her.

But such logic did not make his spirit any lighter.

**

One evening, as the four of them were camped out in the field, she read the chapter in “Tale of the Champion” where Hawke met Fenris for the first time. When she was finished, she chewed her lip, one of her many tells that she was working out something into the Common tongue.

“Is Fenris a mage?”

“No,” Varric chuckled. “He'd probably kill himself if he was.”

“So-las, you said that elves are better at magic than not-elves?”

“Elves are more likely to be mages than non-elves,” he corrected her. “Modern elves have a genetic connection to the Fade that the other races lack.”

“Tevinter is ruled by mages?”

“Yes.”

“Most slaves in Tevinter are elves?”

"Yes," Solas said, not bothering to hide his anger. What Tevinter had done to the remnants of his People, after everything he had done to free them...

The Herald was leaning forward, a frown on her face. “So...what happens to elf mages in Tevinter? Why do they not rebel?”

“What makes you think they have not tried?” Solas said, his anger close to the surface. “Magic manifests in childhood. Can you not foresee how a Magister could take a child, his property, and use that child's magic for his own purposes? Are you aware, Herald, of the horrific magical experiments done to slaves specifically because they are mages with no legal standing?”

Solas unloaded centuries of frustration and guilt onto the Herald, only vaguely aware that he had started to pace around the campfire. Humans were brutish and short-sighted. The Dalish were fools. The city elves were beaten down and assimilated, little better than slaves themselves. Did she believe humans in the South were any better than Tevinter? Even the Circle was a form of slavery, nothing more!

And on and on and on.

“So-las.”

She said his name quietly, but it felt like he had been slapped awake. The campfire had burned down to embers. Cassandra and Varric had retreated to their tents. The moons had changed position in the sky.

The Herald still sat on her camp-roll, giving him one of those searching looks of hers.

He sighed and knelt down by the fire opposite her, suddenly bone tired. "I apologize, Herald," he said quietly. "The crimes of the Tevinter Imperium are neither your fault nor your priority. I should
keep my own counsel about such matters."

“No apologies,” she said. “I fight slavery many years, too.”

“So you have,” he said. He had forgotten.

“Go to sleep, So-las. I take your watch tonight.”

“That is not necessary, Herald.”

“Is an order, soldier,” she said with a slight smile.

*She is taking care of me,* he realized, *because she believes I am one of her men.* The conflicting emotions he felt at the realization raised too many questions for his state of mind, so he thanked the Herald and ducked into the tent he shared with Varric.

Varric was either asleep or pretending to be. Solas did not disturb him. He lay down on his bedroll and gratefully entered the Fade.

**

The day they cleared out the last of the Templars was a bad day for all of them, but the Herald had the worst of it.

Not long after breaking camp, they found an ocularum—an enchanted skull attached to the top of a pole. When one used the skull to look through its “eyes,” it reflected back the location of some artifacts.

Using the skull to illuminate the object gave the Herald a headache. More than that, though, she had been genuinely distressed by it. “It desecration,” she’d said.

“It is desecration,” Solas said. "Really, Herald, I thought we were past this point in your fluency."

She pointedly ignored him after that. After checking with Cassandra about the local religious traditions, the Herald removed the skull from the pole, wrapped it in cloth and burned it on a small pyre.

She was quiet and withdrawn the rest of the morning.

The nearest artifact illuminated by the ocularum was in the courtyard of Fort Connor, which had been overtaken by Templars and red lyrium. After killing the Templars, Cassandra smashed the red lyrium into smaller pieces. The Herald moved the bodies and the red lyrium into a pile, threw a torch on top, and used her barrier to superheat the whole mess until nothing was left but ash.

The artifact itself turned out to be a shard, which contained the fragment of yet another skull. Solas placed it in his pack for further study. The Herald walked out of the Fort, found the nearest bush, and vomited.

It didn't take long to finish off the Templars, once they had located their encampment, but the Herald was clearly not feeling well. Her barrier failed, and she took an arrow to her upper thigh.

Despite the fact that the wound was bleeding quite freely, the Herald would not let Solas remove the arrow until he had washed his hands. She tried to insist he pour distilled spirits over the wound, “to prevent infection.”

“Really?” Solas said, exasperated. “I routinely prevent and kill infection with magic. Which you
have seen. *With your own eyes.* Your field techniques may be fine for non-mages, but for me, they are a waste of spirits.”

In a fit of pique, he pulled the arrow out of her leg without numbing the flesh around it first. Helen vomited again, this time from the pain, and also all over his robes.

He jumped up in disgust and magicked the vomit off of his clothing. "Charming," he said. "Did you aim for me on purpose?"

“Yeah,” she said, wiping her mouth. “You real prick sometimes.” Then she passed out.

Varric, who had watched the exchange, shook his head. "You planning to stop her bleeding, or do I need to pour booze on it like she wanted and find some bandages?"

Solas didn't answer, but he did heal her while Cassandra and Varric moved the bodies of the Templars downwind. When they were done, Cassandra checked on the Herald. “How is she?” she asked Solas.

"Immature but otherwise fine,” he said, still annoyed.

The Seeker frowned, then undressed the Herald down to her smalls. Cassandra used a damp washrag to wipe the vomit from the Herald's face. When she was done, Varric scooped Helen up into his arms and placed her in one of the tents. Solas tried very hard to ignore how small and vulnerable the Herald looked. *She is fine,* he told himself.

Varric made supper (the dwarf, for all his complaints about the outdoors, was a surprisingly good camp cook) while Cassandra cleaned and repaired the Herald's armor.

Solas sat down in front of the campfire and nursed his grudges while he sharpened his knife. They should have been in a celebratory mood. They'd already routed the apostates. Now the Templars were defeated. They each would have their own private tent tonight. They would likely be heading back to Haven soon, and then on to Val Royeaux.

But without the Herald to ask her endless questions, or to read a chapter from, “Tale of the Champion,” things were quiet and tense between the three of them. Even Varric, ever talkative, spent his time writing in his journal.

After a very long hour of near total silence, Cassandra put the Herald's armor into the tent she was sleeping in. Then she, too, retired for the evening. Solas had first watch.

Once Cassandra was gone, Varric began to pack his things up for the night.

“You know,” Varric said, “you weren't very nice to her today.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me,” Varric said, as he carefully replaced the cap on his ink jar.

“She was being unreasonable,” Solas said. “I see no need to coddle such behavior.”

Varric was silent as he finished putting away his things. Once his pack was closed he stood up and crossed his arms over his chest. “Chuckles, for such a smart man, you sure don't see much.”

Solas raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. Well, by all means, enlighten me.”

“I'm trying to,” Varric said. “Do you believe the story about her coming from another world?”
“Yes.”

“Me, too. I honestly wasn't sure, at first. I thought it might be some weird spy shit that the Nightingale cooked up. But you've seen the Herald, with that magic of hers, and all those questions. How she's constantly surprised by all the little things. I mean, c'mon—Cassandra had to teach her how to light a torch the other night. What else could it be, except that she's from another world?”

“Agreed.” Solas' own reasoning had followed a similar path.

Varric nodded. "She's been here, what, three, four weeks? We tell her she's the Herald of a religion she's never heard of before and doesn't believe in. She barely speaks the language. They ask her to stick around and fix that giant hole in the sky.

“But you know, she's handled it all right so far. Maker help me, I sound like Cassandra, but the fact is, the Herald finds out what needs to be done, and she gets it done. She never complains. She helps people. She listens. She's done everything that's been asked of her, and then some. She's been solid as a rock—until we found that creepy skull thing this morning.”

“The ocularum,” Solas said.

“Whatever it's called, the point is, it freaked her out. Gave her headache. Made her upset. She hasn't eaten anything since then. Did you notice that?”

“I had not,” Solas admitted.

Varric glanced back at the Herald's tent, before continuing. He lowered his voice. "Look, I ran with Hawke for years. I know mages get a raw deal. But even for a mage, you're a pretty weird guy. You talk about shit nobody wants to hear. Spirits, demons, the Fade...things that make most people either run for the hills or call a Templar are your favorite topics.”

Solas pressed his lips together in annoyance. “Do you have a point, Child of the Stone?”

"Yeah. My point is, you aren't exactly surrounded by people who seek out either your company or your opinion. But she does," he said pointing back at the Herald's tent. "In return, you treat her like a spoiled brat.

"Lighten up on her a little bit, OK? Try putting yourself in her shoes for just minute. Imagine being asleep for thousands of years and waking up in a place where everybody either thinks you're guilty of mass murder, or you're a religious icon. Meanwhile, everything and everyone you've ever loved is gone. How are you gonna feel?”

Solas couldn't speak.


“Good night, Master Tethras,” Solas replied, finally finding his manners. “And...thank you. I will think on what you said.”

Solas spent the next couple of hours on watch, occasionally walking the perimeter of the camp. He returned from one such circuit to find the Herald dressed and awake, staring at the stream.
“Herald,” he said, surprised. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

She shrugged.

“Have you eaten anything?” he asked.

“No.”

“Come with me, please,” he said, and he led her back to the banked campfire. He poured the last of the stew into a bowl and handed it to her with a spoon, and a couple of restorative potions.

“Thank you, So-las.”

“You are welcome, Herald. If you will excuse me a moment, I need to check my security wards.” She nodded. Solas re-walked the perimeter. The wards were actually fine, but he wanted her to finish eating before he started talking.

Helen had finished her meal when he returned. She was sipping on a restorative potion and looking up at the sky.

He sat down next to her on the ground, and, like her, looked up at the sky. “I find myself needing to apologize to you once again,” he said quietly.

“Me, too, So-las,” she said. “I am sorry I call you name, sorry I vomit on you. It was...bad day for everybody.”

“But more so for you, Herald. The ocularum upset you a great deal, and I was too busy correcting your grammar to notice. It was unkind of me.”

She lowered her eyes from the sky to the bottle in her hand, her lower lip tucked under her teeth while she worked out what she wanted to say.

“In my world,” she said slowly, “we travel from planet to planet. Is very common. After I join navy, my parents moved to a planet called Eden Prime. It was,” she thought for a moment, “a colony? A human colony. They bought a farm there.”

She stopped and chewed her lip again. Solas forced back the dozens of questions he had. Now was not the time.

“A few years ago—well, few years before I sleep—Eden Prime was invaded by...” she shook her head after a moment or two. “Machina? Machines? But with intelligence. We call them Geth. Geth attacked Eden Prime. Kill most of the colonists.”

Using her finger in the dirt, she drew a long, thin, pointed shape. “Geth take the people, still alive, and, ah,” she drew a stick figure of a person on the device. “How you say?”

“Impale,” he said gently.

“Yes. They impale people. It turn people into husk.” She drew squiggly lines coming from the body. “Husk that fights you,” her voice was cracking, “that forgets you. Marines that stop invasion had to kill all the husks. Most bodies never found.”

She tapped the stick person on the device. “My parents,” she whispered. “Both of them.” She sniffed, as she erased the figures in the dirt with her hand. “The skull today, remind me of my parents, of how their bodies were...”
“Desecrated,” Solas said, handing her his handkerchief. “The word you used this morning was ‘desecration.’”

“Yes,” she used the handkerchief to dab her eyes. “And so tonight, I have very bad dream.”

“You dream?” he said, genuinely surprised.

She pulled the handkerchief away from her face and looked at him, equally surprised. “Everybody dream, So-las.”

“Dreaming requires a connection to the Fade,” he explained. “The dwarves do not dream at all. Have you always dreamed?”

“Of course,” she said, puzzled.

“And there is no Fade in your world? You are quite sure?”

“Quite sure. Everybody in my world dream.” He must have looked as skeptical as he felt, because she said, “So-las, dogs dream.”

Well. That was patently ridiculous, but perhaps the middle of his apology was not the time to start a new argument. The topic could wait.

Besides, the Herald looked exhausted. “You should get some rest, Herald. You lost a great deal of blood today. The rest of us have the watch covered.”

He stood up and offered his hand to help her stand up, as well. "Thank you, So-las," she said, looking up at him. "I promise, tomorrow I use my articles and verbs.”

"And I promise that I will remember you are a stranger needing guidance, Herald, not a child needing correction." She said good night and returned to her tent. Solas mused on the things he had learned about her until it was time for Cassandra to take over watch.

It wasn't until he was asleep, and in the Fade, that he realized he'd forgotten to ask her what her bad dream had actually been about.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, massive, massive thanks to my betas. They to do more heavy lifting with each successive chapter.

I posted a mod list. If you have access to mods, I highly recommend them all. (If I had time to learn how to make mods, I would. There are a number of things I'd like to do just for the screenshots.)
Thank you again, everybody, for your continued support, kudos and comments!!!
Chapter thirteen

Chapter Summary

It is bloody difficult to get out of the Hinterlands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirteen

They found Horsemaster Dennet the following morning. The sour-faced old human refused to sell his horses to them until they made the surrounding area safer, although he did offer a Ferelden Forder as a show of good faith.

The Forder was a 16-hands tall chestnut gelding, with a white blaze down its nose and a serene disposition. The Herald promptly gave him to Solas. Cassandra argued against it. “You are the Herald. The horse belongs to you.”

“Cassandra, I need a ladder to mount this horse,” the Herald said firmly. “Solas is the tallest. It belongs to him.”

Solas did not argue with her. Dennet might lack any semblance of social grace, but the man knew his horseflesh. “Ar melan ma, ‘Mor’Lanun,’” he murmured to the horse. I name thee, ‘Generosity.’

He scratched behind the Forder's ears. The horse leaned into his touch and gazed at him with deeply happy eyes.

Solas was extremely pleased. He had not ridden a quality mount since before the Fall. While nothing could compare to the Harts of old, this horse had a strong body, a willing spirit and steady disposition that would serve Solas well.

“He is in love with you already, Solas,” the Herald said, amusement in her voice.

“Yes,” Solas said, moving his scratches down Mor’Lanun's nose, before turning to face the Herald. He gave her a slight bow of his head. “Nuvas ema ir’enastela, Herald. ‘Thank you, I am most grateful.’ I named him, ‘Mor’Lanun’ which means, ‘generosity.’ It reflects both his spirit, and yours.”

That earned him a rare, brilliant smile from the Herald. Truly, whatever other frailties the Herald possessed, she had perfect teeth. “How do I say, ‘you are most welcome’ in your tongue, Solas?”

“In this instance, the proper form would be, ‘Nuva lasa su ma enaste.’”

“Nuva lasa su ma enaste, Solas,” she said, returning his slight bow with one of her own. Her accent was less atrocious than he expected.

They inspected the area around the farm. Among other things, they found another ocularum, which the Herald grimly used to mark locations of the strange shards on their map. She also found an astrarium near the top of a hill that overlooked the farm. She unlocked it by tracing a constellation,
although what it was trying to light up was anybody's guess.

Solas was able to say, truthfully, that he had never seen one before. He did not say that it had once been one of his own artifacts that kept the Veil intact and that it showed every sign of having been repurposed by Tevinter mages.

That was not a pleasant thought. If more than a small number of his artifacts had been damaged, or stolen, or deactivated, or otherwise used for their intended purpose...well, it was small wonder the Veil had grown so weak over the centuries.

It was just one more thing he had not been wise enough to foresee, one more unintended consequence of his folly.

The horsemaster's wife told them that a nearby wolf pack had gone mad, attacking people, “like darkspawn during the Blight.”

Finally, Dennet's farmhand, a man named Bron, reported that bandits were harassing farmers. He wanted the Inquisition to put up security towers to protect the farm and surrounding area from bandits. And maybe kill all the bandits, as well.

Bron then made a pass at the Herald that was so clumsy, it was painful to witness. “Listen, um, Herald,” he said, trying to pull her away from the group for a bit of privacy. “You ever get cold and lonely out there, just stop by. I'll warm you right up.”

The Herald gave him a long, direct look, then threw her hood back so he could see her bald head. He flinched a bit at the sight of it. "You ask me to go secure the country," she stated, her accent deliberately thick. "To go kill all the big, bad wolves, all the monsters, and all the bandits. Build some towers for you. Then you think I will come back here for...sex? With you?" She looked him up and down once, shaking her head. "I have enough unpleasant chores already, no?"

Bron vanished before she could say anything further.

As they rode away from the farm, the Herald muttered, “That man is,” followed by a string of words in her own language.

“Hey, now,” Varric said, “can't blame a guy for trying.”

“That was not trying, Varric,” said Cassandra. “Trying involves thought. And effort.”

“Idiots like him on every planet,” the Herald shook her head.

The mention of planets reminded Solas that he had questions. “Herald,” Solas asked, “last night, you mentioned that your people travel to other planets.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“In ships. Very large, very powerful ships leave the planet and travel through space.”

“I see.” Then, “Actually, no. I do not see. What sort of ships? I do not imagine they are anything like the vessels used to cross a river, or the sea.”

The Herald explained their “spaceships.” She said there was nothing between the planets and the stars, not even air—just a vast, dark emptiness; and that being in space was like being surrounded
on all sides by the night sky.

Most planets did not support life. “Garden worlds,” like Thedas, and her Earth, did support life. She compared the distance between planets to a bee flying to one of the moons. It was exponentially farther between stars, nearly beyond comprehension.

The Mass Relays that she described, however—those were not beyond comprehension at all, not to Solas. They sounded like eluvians, writ large. Not that he shared his insight with any of them.

“So what happens if the ship springs a leak?” Varric asked. “Does it sink?”

“No, but it might explode, or go off course. Depends on the leak.”

“What about your ship?” Cassandra asked. Solas perked his ears up at that. The Herald had a ship? Leliana had not told him that, only that she had “traveled across the stars.”

“That is not really a ship. That is an escape pod. It is like,” she stopped to think of the right words, “like a lifeboat that you cannot steer.”

“That seems an odd choice for a long journey,” Solas said.

“It was not my choice,” the Herald said. “I did not even know until I woke up on Thedas.”

“You know, I’m not really clear on that whole, ‘slept for ten-thousand years’ thing. What happened, exactly?” Varric asked.

The Herald sighed. "It started with my job," but that was as far as she got before the mark flared violently to life. She gasped in pain.

A rift had opened up over a nearby stream. It was nearly as large as the one in the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Demons of terror and despair lay in wait.

The Herald had already defeated several demons of terror in the last few weeks. She found them “annoying” (her word) but they had never affected more than just her physical form.

This was her first time facing a despair demon, and there were not just one, but two. The demons were strong. Worse, they were drawn to the Herald, They hissed at her in her own tongue as they twirled by, leaving her covered in a layer of frost that Solas knew would bring a bone-deep ache.
She never stopped fighting, but her movements slowed, and she looked like she was holding back tears.

“The Herald needs help!” Solas called out to the others and stepped through the fade to the
Herald's side. He placed fire runes around himself and the Herald. “Pull them towards us!” he shouted.

She did not hesitate, pulling first one, and then the other to herself and Solas. The demons ignited as they passed over the runes, and the Herald placed a barrier around them. They quickly immolated into ash.

Closing the rift took longer than usual. It was large and very high off the ground. The Herald was in no small amount of distress, crying out in anger and pain when the Rift finally snapped shut. She turned her back on them all, walked a few paces away, and bent forwards, hands on knees.

Solas followed, Cassandra and Varric behind him. He placed a hand on her back and sent a healing spell into her. She stood up, tears in her eyes. “What sort of planet is this, that such creatures exist?” she asked him, her voice ragged and hoarse.

“Those were despair demons.”

“They spoke to me,” she sobbed, “in my language. How do they know my language?” Solas had not seen her this upset since she'd been attacked in the dungeon of the Chantry.

“Because they are reflecting your own thoughts. They feed on grief. Whatever they said to you, it was to rob you of hope. Do not let them succeed.”

“But everything they said to me was true,” she whispered.

“What did they say?” Cassandra asked, scowling.

The Herald did not answer, but instead covered her face with her hands, as if trying to smother her feelings.

“Despair demons are not arbiters of objective truth, Herald” Cassandra explained. “You should not listen to them.”

The Herald wiped her eyes on her sleeve and took a moment to regain her composure. She looked at her companions. "My apologies," she said. "We should go." She walked over to where their horses were waiting.

Varric looked at Cassandra. “Pep talks really aren't your thing.”

“Shut up, Varric. At least I said something.”

They mounted their horses and followed Helen. She was quiet as they made their way to the cave where a demon had taken control of the strange wolves.

Subduing the terror demon was not terribly difficult. It dropped a token of protection against wolves, which Solas pocketed. He did not need it—wolves never attacked him—but he wanted to study it later.

Still, he hated killing the wolves. The Herald apparently felt the same way, as she handled the wolves’ bodies with far more reverence than she had any of the slavers, apostates or Templars they'd killed. She ran her hand along the pelt of one of the females. It was thick and glossy.

“This pack was healthy,” she said when he knelt down next to her, curious about her reaction. “Wolves do not make war. They did not choose this. It is a sorrow.”
“It is,” he agreed. On impulse, he took the token from his pocket and placed it in her palm. “But, one hopes, not entirely in vain.” He wrapped her fingers around the token. “The demon dropped this token of protection. I believe it will prevent other wolves from attacking us. It could not save this pack, but it might save many others.”

Solas realized her closed hand was still clasped in his. He let go. Her dark eyes solemnly searched his for a long moment, before she looked down at the token in her hand. “Nuvas ema ir’enastela, Solas,” she said quietly. “It is very kind of you.”

“This is a small thing, Herald. A better response would be, 'Ma serannas,' among the Dalish or modern elves, or 'Serannasan Ma.' if you are using the more archaic forms.”

“Serannasan Ma, Solas,” she said.

“De da’rahn,” he responded, quietly pleased that she chose the proper form. He fished a bit of cord from his pack and threaded it through the token so she could wear it around her neck. Then, for good measure, he added his own ward to it to help protect her from cold damage. It would not stop a despair demon from taunting her, but it could help her fight the physical effects.

That evening, they read a chapter from Varric's book that featured a certain Knight-Captain beating a man who was revealed to be an abomination. After she finished reading the scene, the Herald gave a sharp look at Varric, who was trying (and failing) not to grin.

“This Templar,” she tapped the page once with a fingertip, “this is Commander Rutherford?”

“Yes. Same guy.”

She blinked. “He looked for apostates. That was his job.”

“Mmmm-hmmmm,” Varric looked as happy as Solas had ever seen him.

“And he did not notice that Hawke was casting magic. Right in front of him.”

“Nope!” Varric said.

The Herald looked at Cassandra incredulously. “And...this is who you hire to lead the army?”

Cassandra, who looked like she wanted to disembowel Varric, said, "It was a long time ago, Herald. Cullen has changed a great deal since his early days in Kirkwall."

“Did his eyesight improve?” the Herald asked. Varric threw his head back and laughed, as the Seeker sputtered. The Herald finished reading the chapter, stopping several more times to tease Cassandra, mostly at the expense of poor Commander Rutherford.

Solas was startled to realize that he'd been smiling and chuckling along with the others.

The recognition sobered him. Pretending to be part of the group was one thing. Actually belonging was far more dangerous.

The Herald had first watch that night, and Solas had the second. For once, he traded some of his sleep for the opportunity to ask her questions about her world. He started with a question that he had wanted to ask since the first moment he'd see her in battle.

“How does your magic work?”

He waited patiently as she chewed her lip. “Do you remember in the dungeon, when I was dying?”
“Yes. You had a skull fracture, your brain was swelling, and you'd been poisoned.”

“I had a skull fracture?” she asked, clearly shocked.

“You did. It was the worst of your injuries, and one of the first things I healed.”

“I did not know this, Solas. Thank you.”

“You have thanked me already, Herald. Think no more on the matter. But you were saying?”

She nodded. “There is a material in my world that we call 'element zero,' or 'eezo.' In its natural state, or when it is contained correctly, it is inert. If handled improperly, it can become radioactive, although it does not actually decay.”

“I am not familiar with this concept.”

More lip chewing, then, “Radioactivity is like the red lyrium. Even though you do not touch it, if you are around it too long, it can make you sick. Decay is when...” she closed her eyes and for a moment, had to mutter to herself in her own language, something she had not done in a while.

"A candle radiates heat and light but is eventually consumed. When eezo become radioactive, it is not consumed. We still do not understand why. The scientists back home have a term for it. They call it, 'transmutative decay.' It decays into itself. Imagine the candle, as it burns, recaptures the heat and light and returns it back to the candle as wax and string.”

Solas sat back and thought about the implications. "Such a material sounds extremely useful."

“It is the cornerstone of my entire civilization. I quite literally would not be here without it. Anyway, the engine core of my escape pod contains eezo. It was damaged, and leaked into the escape pod as I slept.”

“And that is how you came to be poisoned.”

“Yes.” She held her right hand out and created a small rotating ball of energy. “Biotics have nodules of eezo all along our nervous system.”

“Ah,” he said, finally understanding what he had experienced when he'd healed her.

"When eezo comes into contact with an electrical current, it creates dark energy. My brain sends electrical impulses to the eezo in my body," she continued, using her left hand to point at her head, and then down along her right arm.

“Dark energy,” she pointed at the floating ball, “creates a field that changes the mass of any object inside of it. I can make a man light enough to throw. I can make his armor so heavy that it collapses under its own weight. I make the air dense enough to deflect physical objects, or heavy enough that it creates a singularity, capturing everything nearby in its gravity.”

“Fascinating. Are biotics common in your world?”


“What do you mean, 'here in Andromeda?'”

"Here in this galaxy. I was born in the Milky Way galaxy. We call this galaxy 'Andromeda.'” She looked up at the sky, the way she did sometimes as if looking for something. "I think this is still
Andromeda. I do not actually know.”

They talked all through her watch. Then they talked through his. She drew diagrams and pictures in the dirt. Atoms. Particles. Star systems. Galaxies. His head was spinning by the time he lay down on his bedroll.

One hundred thousand people, she'd said, twenty thousand of which were humans. They had deliberately gone to sleep for 600 years and crossed the heavens, all for the chance to start over.

Solas slipped into the Fade and found Wisdom. "I have much to tell you, my friend," he said.

***

They left for Haven the following day. The trip back was easier than the trip down. They were few rifts, the Herald was no longer saddle-sore, and the Inquisition had done a good job of keeping the roads mostly clear of bandits.

Mor'Lanun was a marvelous horse. He did not spook around demons or bandits, was swift and steady, and effortlessly took to Solas' instruction. More than once, Solas loosely tied the reins to the saddle-horn and read a book, knowing that Mor'Lanun could be trusted to go where Solas wanted.

The Herald continued to learn about Thedas, asking questions during the day and reading from Varric's book at night.

When he could, Solas asked questions about her world. This often led to her repeating things Solas already knew for the sake of Varric and Cassandra. The Herald did not seem to mind, though, and Solas had the chance to ask for more details.

“Twenty-thousand humans?” Varric asked. “How the hell did you find twenty-thousand humans crazy enough to be put to sleep for six hundred years?”

“There were over eleven billion humans just on Earth, Varric. Nearly a billion more on the colonies.”

“What? No. Now you're just making shit up.”

And later, from Cassandra: “So, all of the stars we see at night, those are other suns? I never knew.”

Most of their time talking, however, was done answering the Herald's questions. As interesting as her history was, it was the immediate future of Thedas that needed saving.

As her language skills improved, her queries became more challenging and complicated. One morning, she started their day out by asking, “Cassandra, who was Andraste? Was she a real person?”

“Oh!” Cassandra sounded genuinely surprised by the questions. “I suppose we did gloss over the details back in Haven.”

Solas held his tongue as Cassandra explained the accepted history, teachings and beliefs about Andraste. He had learned painful lessons about trying to correct the historical inaccuracies of a people's religion. He would not try again, at least not now, and certainly not with the Seeker herself.
It was a good thing they were on the road, and that the four of them had become accustomed to the Herald's candor, for she asked questions that, in another setting, would have led to bloodshed. "Was Andraste a mage?" "Was Andraste an elf?" "Who was the Maker?"

Solas found some of her questions quite interesting, not because of Cassandra's answers, but because it showed him how the Herald's mind worked. "What did the Maker use to create the Veil?" "What is the Fade made of?" "How long had the Veil been up?"

The only time Solas spoke up was when the Herald asked, "Why worship a god that turned his back on you?"

"Why, indeed," slipped out before he could help himself.

Varric, surprisingly, had quite a lot to say about Andraste. "You wanna know what I think? I think Andraste went to war as much to get out of a bad marriage as she did to free the slaves." And, "C'mon, Seeker, you don't actually believe Maferath was jealous of the Maker, do you? He was jealous of Shartan!"

"Who was Shartan?" That question alone led to a couple of hours of incredibly uncomfortable discussion.

Finally, the Herald turned to Solas. "What about you, Solas? What do you believe?"

"I believe in cause and effect, wisdom as its own reward, and the inherent right of all free willed people to exist," he asked. "Yourself?"

The Herald looked at her left hand a long time before answering. "I no longer know."

**

They rested at a small Inquisition camp that had been set up since they had last passed through the area. It was near a stream, which the Herald eyed with longing.

After supper, she tried to sneak down to the stream. Solas followed her. "Herald," he said, stopping her as she was beginning to pull off a boot. "I am afraid there is not much privacy here. A proper bath must wait."

"I would rather they see me naked than dirty," she said, but she reluctantly put her boot back on. "Cassandra also said it is a bad idea."

"Unfortunately, Cassandra is correct. It would cause an unnecessary scandal that the Inquisition does not need."

"I am filthy, Solas. That is also unnecessary."

"I understand your frustration, especially given your personal habits. For whatever it's worth, you are likely the cleanest human in all of Ferelden."

She looked him up and down with a grin. "You are always clean, Solas, even your clothing. I think the cleanest human in all of Ferelden is probably you."

"I am not human; I am an elf!" he snapped.

Hurt surprise flashed across the Herald's face. "Ir abelas, Solas," she said, in a subdued tone. "I did not mean to offend."
Solas ran his palms over his skull in frustration. *This is who she is*, he told himself. *A stranger needing guidance, not a child needing correction, remember?* She had spent the entire day inadvertently offending the Seeker. Why would she act any differently with him? She did not say these things out of malice, only ignorance.

But still—the Herald had a way of scraping his emotions raw.

"Herald, you must listen to me." He placed his hands on her shoulders and bent down a little so he could look her in the eyes. "The races of Thedas are both distinct and proud. They do not see themselves as the same, nor do they wish to. You will do the Inquisition no favors if you forget this."

She frowned at him, her eyes huge and sad. It felt a bit like kicking a puppy, but this was something she needed to understand. “You are the only hope to close the Breach. If you offend the wrong person, if you fail to establish an alliance with the mages or Templars, the Breach will never be closed. It will mean the death and destruction of everything in this world. Do you understand?”

She nodded, and said only, “Yes.” Then she walked back to camp without him.

___

De da’rahn=It is nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everybody, who had left kudos and comments. The comment section of this fic is becoming the sort of discussion I'd always wanted to have when I first played these games. I have never known a more thoughtful, passionate group of people.
Enormous thanks again to my betas. I really cannot emphasize enough how much this story would be not happening without their help.

For the record, "transmutative decay" is not a real thing.
Chapter fourteen

Chapter Summary

Helen and the ground team head back to Haven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fourteen.

When the Alliance discharged Helen, they sent her for the required medical status conference. It was SOP to identify any medical issues related to the service member's military service, and (in theory) make sure that those issues were covered by the Alliance.

Helen received a clean bill of health, but the physician also gave her an off-the-record warning.

"Just because the issues with your stalker and your parents aren't service related doesn't mean you don't need help. You've been using combat to distract you from anger and grief. Frankly, you need counseling and lots of it."

It was good advice that Helen had completely ignored. She was a biotic with extensive experience in both wetware research and combat. She had no family ties in the Milky Way but was still young enough to reproduce. As far as the Initiative was concerned, her psych profile was healthy enough.

She'd told herself that she'd do counseling after she was settled in Andromeda, after she'd found a new normal.

Now, as they picked their way back to Haven, Helen struggled to keep her shit together. Her “new normal” was a cold, primitive planet determined to crack open her vault of bad memories and unresolved issues at every opportunity.

Like the ocularum. When Helen had first seen it, she'd figured it was just some primitive, tribal marker. She hadn't expected the inside of the skull to look like geth tech, all glowing circuits, and creepy energy. By the time she realized that the "circuits" were just lines of luminescent paint, she had a raging migraine, and visions of Eden Prime trying to shove their way into her thoughts.

The possessed wolf pack also did not help. It was hard enough coming to terms with magic, demons, spirits and all of the other bullshit that violated her worldview. That any of it could take control of an entire pack of innocent animals somehow made it all that much worse.

And those despair demons, dropping out of that rift, with too many teeth and not enough skin?


The first time she'd heard English in a month, and it was to hear all of her deepest sorrows laid bare.
“Stop it!” she'd cried, but of course that just made it worse. If Solas hadn't come to her aid when he did, she very well might have allowed herself to just lie down and die.

Now she was having nightmares. Given everything she'd been going through, nightmares would be *completely fucking normal* on Earth. But here on Planet Everything Wants to Kill You, nightmares were apparently cause for alarm.

Several hours after she'd accidentally offended Solas by calling him “human,” she woke up—again—in the middle of the night. She dressed in the dark, left the tent, and relieved Cassandra's watch early.

Helen took the watch for the rest of the night. She walked the perimeter, munched on trail mix, and tried to not think about her nightmares. Or her parents. Or Solas. Or her her dismal future on this godforsaken planet.

By the time the others emerged from their tents, Helen had made breakfast. Cassandra frowned at her. “Herald,” she said, checking the sky, “why are you still on watch?”

Helen just shrugged. “I was up.” It was a dodge, but nobody argued with her. They were all getting tired from the road.

She tried to avoid Solas, but he insisted on riding beside her. For the first time since she'd met him, he *volunteered* information.

He told her about the elves, not just the Dalish and city elves but the ancient ones, as well. The Elvhen had once been immortal, he said, and the Fade had been part of their natural world. They lost their immortality and most of their magic after the fall of their empire. Humans rose to ascendency at some point after that.

She wondered if he was offering this information as a way to explain his outburst from the night before.

Whatever his reason for offering the history lesson, Helen was impressed with how both Solas and Cassandra discussed it. Cassandra made no excuses for the behavior of humans in general, and the Chantry in particular. Solas felt that modern elves were unwilling to make the societal changes needed to bring about true equality.

They were honest and respectful towards each other. She made a mental note to herself that these two worked well together, should she ever need to mix up her ground team.

That night was their last on the road before reaching Haven. After supper, Varric passed around a flask of brandy he'd been saving, as Helen read two more chapters from “Tale of the Champion.”

Suffice it to say, Varric was perhaps not the biggest fan of Commander Rutherford. After reading Cullen's comments about mages, Helen was beginning to understand why.

She realized halfway through the last chapter that she was now thinking in the Common tongue.

That night, as she slept, she dreamed she was in the CIC of the *SSV Trafalgar*, her last posting. She was looking at the galaxy map. A small warning icon was blinking, so she touched it to see if there was a new hot spot she needed to get to. “WARNING: THEDAS UNDER QUARANTINE. AVOID CONTACT. REPEAT, AVOID CONTACT.”

She pressed her comm to alert her officers.
Silence. She looked up. The ship was empty. Nobody was sitting at their post. Where had everybody gone?

Helen searched the CIC, calling out for her crew, but nobody answered. She walked onto the bridge. They were queued in front of a Mass Relay, but nobody was flying the ship!

In a panic, Helen sat down in the pilot's seat. She didn't know how to fly a ship, and she didn't know how to send coordinates to a Relay! Where was the Flight Lieutenant? The comm array before her didn't make any sense. Its graphics morphed into runes and symbols that did not belong there.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I can fly the ship." She looked over to the navigator's chair. Her father sat in it, while her mother stood behind him.

"Just let me find the Captain," she said.

"No need," he said, his eyes crinkling up with mischief the way they did when he was joking around. "Just let me through, and I'll take care of everything. We'll hit the Mass Relay and go home. We'll all be together again."

Helen's heart sank. No matter how grief stricken she'd ever been, no matter how much she had longed to see her parents once more, she'd never, ever, once forgotten that they were dead.

"You can't," she said.

As soon as she said it, her parents turned into sparking, shrieking, blackened husks. Helen stumbled out of the pilot's seat and ran into the CIC. Husks filled the entire ship. Her crew hadn't gone missing—they'd all been captured by the Geth and husked!

Helen charged through the CIC, as husks tried to grab her, sink their teeth into her. She reached for her Carnifax, but it wasn't there. She pushed open the door to the armory.

Electronic chattering buzzed in her ears. The armory was filled with dozens of Geth troopers. Four of them held her shrieking Navigator down on a workbench. His torso had been sliced open. The Geth inserted tech into him while he sobbed in agony. "Stop!" she screamed.

In unison, every Geth trooper raised its headlamp-face towards her. Several of them pulled out weapons and started firing, depleting her shields. She needed a weapon, now!

She started to call up her barrier but a shriveled, blackened hand grabbed her from behind. She kicked and screamed and fought, but husks pulled her down to the ground, tearing at her clothing. One of them wore her mother's wedding band.

They forced her down onto the other workbench. Just as a Geth trooper jammed a hose into her guts, Helen bolted awake.

This time, when she left her tent, it was Varric whose watch she relieved.

Cassandra confronted her in the morning. "You are not sleeping, Herald," she said as she came out of the tent to find Helen, once again, making breakfast.

"No," Helen admitted.

"Why not?"
“Nightmares,” Helen said, as Solas joined then.

“Still?” Solas asked. “Why did you not say something?”

“You knew?” Cassandra asked him.

“I knew the Herald had a bad dream several nights ago. I was not aware until now that it was a recurring problem.”

“It is just bad dreams,” Helen said. “This will pass.”

Solas frowned, adjusting his cloak around his shoulders in the chill. “What are your nightmares about, if I may ask?”

“My parents,” she said. She did not elaborate.

“I see,” he said, his gaze softening. “Let me know if they continue.”

She shrugged. She had not sought help for bad dreams since she was a child. She wasn't about to start now.

They arrived in Haven to very little fanfare in the middle of the morning. She had forgotten how bad it smelled, and struggled to keep from wrinkling her nose. As soon as they entered Haven, her companions bid her farewell and went their separate ways.

Helen went to her own cabin, to find the young servant girl already there, arranging some food on the table.

She jumped up at Helen's arrival. “Welcome back to Haven, milady,” she curtsied. “This is from Ambassador Montilyet.” She handed Helen a note.

“Thank you, ah...” Helen frowned. “I apologize, I do not know your name.”

“Oh! It's Telina, milady.”

“Telina. Thank you, Telina. I appreciate this.”

The girl nodded awkwardly, then said, “If you want, just leave your travel clothes on the chair there. I'll get them cleaned proper for you, milady.” Telina she hurried out the door.

Helen sighed, as she opened Josephine's note.

Dear Herald,

A runner has informed us that you will arrive within the hour. I have made arrangements for a meal and hot water to be delivered to your quarters. Please take whatever time you need to wash off the road and to eat. When you are ready, if you would be so kind as to join the rest of the advisors in the War Room, we would all appreciate it very much.

Looking forward to seeing you again,

Ambassador J. Montilyet

Helen looked around. Sure enough, over on the hearth was a large kettle of steaming water. She locked the cabin door, closed all the curtains, and stripped naked.
Even if it was only a sponge bath, it was glorious. She washed herself head to toe, twice. She had plenty of hot water and soap, and privacy, which was clearly a prerequisite for bathing in Thedas under all circumstances.

When she was clean and dry, she put on her smalls and her leggings and looked in the wardrobe. Josephine had removed the silks and replaced them with outfits that looked much more sensible. Helen picked what she initially took to be a cream-colored, calf-length dress, but was, in fact, very lightweight leather armor. She bolted down the food and brushed her teeth. Then, for the first time in over a month, she picked up the mirror and looked at herself.

She was shocked by her reflection, and not just because she was still bald.

Helen had always had an active life, but she'd never been deprived of anything. She'd always had plenty to eat, a bed to sleep in, and easy access to hygiene and medical care. Most of her adulthood had been spent indoors—on a ship or at a desk. Even combat missions had mostly happened in warehouses or compounds. And when she'd been outside, it was usually in sealed armor, fully protected from the elements.

It had been a life of plenty, although she had not known it at the time. The day she entered cryo, an Initiative tech had mistaken her for being in her late teens.

No longer. Five weeks of outdoor travel, fighting, and barely adequate food rations had tanned her skin and hardened the lines of her face.

Helen stared at herself for a full minute, and searched for any sign of the young Alliance researcher that had once helped design the latest upgrades for wetware, who had ordered pad thai for lunch, who had cried with her friends over “Fleet and Flotilla.”.

A sharp, deep ache stabbed through her as she placed the mirror back down. Don't cry, don't cry. You're a goddamn Marine. Don't fucking cry.
She walked around the cabin to calm down. God help her, she'd have given *anything* just then to see an Asari, a Turian, or a Salarian. She had more in common with any member of any Council race, than she did with every single human on Thedas.

She understood what Solas had been trying to say a couple of nights before, about how the races on Thedas saw themselves as separate and unequal. It's not like the racism was hard to spot or anything, especially not his.

But Solas didn't understand why they were all human, or at least, why they were all *homo sapiens sapiens*. None of them did. How could they? How could she explain that the shape of an ear was completely insignificant compared to the blue skin and crests of the Asari, or the mandibles and carapace of a Turian? The redundant nervous systems in Krogans?

Well. It hardly mattered now. She was stranded here, probably for the rest of her life, short as it was likely to be. Helen took several deep, calming breaths and left her small, dirty cabin.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks once again to my betas. They have been incredibly supportive and clear-eyed about this story.

I had some formatting issues trying to upload this to the archive, so if anybody notices anything amiss, I'm trying to get it fixed. Just, you know, be patient with me. And thank you to everybody who left kudos and comments and reviews!! As any author can tell you, getting a notification that somebody has left a kudos or a review absolutely makes my day better.
Chapter fifteen

Every day, more recruits came to Haven to volunteer for the Inquisition's army. All sorts arrived: city elves escaping an alienage; dwarves from both the surface and Orzammar; mercenaries and old soldiers and people with nowhere else to go; even a handful of Dalish showed up, ready to start anew.

Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine sorted them all: Soldiers, Scouts, Support.

Most of the time, placement was fairly obvious. A middle-aged elven housekeeper who was fluent in Common, Orlesian and Tevene was placed in Leliana's spy network. The teenager from Orzammar who'd been disowned and could wield a mace as heavy as himself was placed in the Infantry.

Sometimes, Cullen and Leliana wanted the same people. A pair of extraordinary archers (A Dalish man and his human partner) wound up with Cullen because they refused to be separated. The Ferelden woman who could bash with a shield as well as she could spin daggers into blurs went with Leliana—but only after Cullen lost a coin toss.

Cullen stayed busy. His men respected him. The recruits were progressing, getting better every day. Some of them would be truly exceptional soldiers. He was lucky to be here, and he knew it. He was grateful to be useful, grateful to be part of the change that Thedas so desperately needed.

But Maker help him, his personal demons seemed to hound his every step.

His withdrawal symptoms didn't just continue, they got worse. Food had no flavor. Water did not quench his thirst. Ale, mead, and wine suddenly tasted like vinegar. Many nights, he either did not sleep, or he only had a few hours before the nightmares woke him.

He was never one to use prostitutes to satisfy his body's urges, preferring to take matters into his own hand. But even that no longer brought relief. If anything, it made his cravings for lyrium even worse.

Two weeks after the Herald left for the Hinterlands, Cullen was dragged into Josephine's office to meet Ivans' brother, a minor noble from some Free Marches pisspot.

Count Pisspot demanded justice for his dead brother and personal satisfaction from the Herald herself. Cullen explained that the Herald would not be charged in Ivans' death, and was, in fact, not even in Haven, Count Pisspot threatened to harm Cullen's family in retaliation.

In a flash, Pisspot was against the wall, Cullen's sword was against his neck. “Your brother was so
despised that his fellow Templars left him behind when the Circles disbanded. I allowed him here as a personal favor to the Knight-Commander of Starkhaven. What I got for my generosity was a Templar so worthless that he died trying to kill a naked, shackled, unconscious woman.”

Sweat ran down the noble's temple, his eyes wide with fear. Cullen leaned forward and spoke in a low, menacing tone. "Threaten my family again, and I'll send your ashes back to the Free Marches in the same urn as your brother's."

Count Pisspot swallowed and looked at Josephine. "Ambassador," he said, his voice shaky, "you can't possibly stand there and let this dog lord treat me like this."

Josephine had not raised even a single, well-groomed eyebrow at the display. "Your brother openly discussed his plans to murder the Herald. His attack was witnessed by several people. All are in agreement that the Herald acted in self-defense. Had your brother succeeded in his plans, the sentence would have been a public hanging. This would have brought significantly more, ah, notoriety to your family name.

"We have tried to handle this as discreetly as possible, Count," she continued. "But the fact remains, your brother did try to murder the Herald of Andraste, who is already becoming a much-beloved figure for her kindness and bravery. You have just threatened the family of the man who leads her Army. Perhaps a public airing of grievances is in order?"

The man swallowed again. "No," he said finally, his voice tight. "No, I do not think that will be necessary. My apologies, Commander Rutherford. Your family will have no trouble from me or mine."

Cullen held eye contact with the man for another heartbeat before sheathing his sword. Josephine, acting as if nothing unusual had occurred, gave Pisspot an urn with his brother's ashes, expressed her condolences on his loss, and sent him on his way.

"Well," Josephine said, brightly, as she walked back to her desk and sat down, "that went better than I expected."

"I nearly kill a man in your office and that's...better than expected?"

"I am Antivan, Commander," she said smoothly. "It takes more than a blade pointed at somebody else's throat to fluster me."

Cullen barked out a laugh. "I'll keep that in mind." He started to leave, then thought of something. Although he had kept generally abreast of Cassandra's and the Herald's progress, he had never considered her subsequent reputation. "Is the Herald really becoming known for her 'kindness and bravery,' or was all that just verbal maneuvering?" he asked, rather skeptically.

"Oh, it's quite true, Commander. Both Leliana and I hear from our contacts that the Herald has freed slaves, fed and clothed refugees, closed rifts, and has generally acted as a force for peace."

"Oh. Well. That's good then," Cullen said, a bit lamely.

Josephine gave him a sympathetic look. "Commander, I know you and the Herald are not on the best of terms but if she is half as good as our reports say, I am sure you will be friends in no time."

Cullen made a noncommittal noise as he left her office, and kept his doubts to himself. He was Cullen Rutherford, veteran of the two worst Circles in Ferelden's history. Most of his friends were dead, or mad from lyrium. His only real friend was Cassandra, and even she was more like a bossy sister.
Now he was the Commander of an army. He outranked almost everybody here. He couldn't afford to make friends.

***

Cullen,

You have not written as promised to keep me posted on your progress. Therefore, I will assume that you are not eating properly, and are yelling too much at your men.

I am certain you know by now that we subdued the fighting at the Crossroads. Mother Giselle should arrive in Haven shortly. We will stay here in the Hinterlands until we have located and defeated both the apostate and the Templar factions.

The Herald is doing well. She is quick to help people, and is learning our language and history. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge has come from Varric's book about Hawke. Perhaps, when we return to Haven, I will give her a copy of the Chant.

I must also confess that her magic sometimes terrifies me. I watched with my own eyes as she threw a slaver so high into the air that we lost sight of him. Maker knows, the man deserved it, but it was a very brutal form of justice.

We have encountered red lyrium growing here in the Hinterlands. After what you witnessed in Kirkwall, we have tried to destroy as much of it as we safely can.

Eat something.

C. Pentaghast

Cassandra was correct that he had not written like he'd promised. He was at least eating every single day, if not as much as he should, then at least more than he wanted. And some of the recruits were idiots. He was building an army. There was no such thing as, "too much yelling."

He read Cassandra's letter a second time. "Her magic sometimes terrifies me.” This, coming from the Hero of Orlais, who had both flown and killed dragons. What if the Herald became mad with power, or possessed? None of them had a way to neutralize her magic. What was to stop the Herald from becoming a tyrant, were she so inclined?

And she was using, “Tale of the Champion” as a world history text. Wonderful.

Cullen had read the book, too. Several events had been embellished and a few parts were just flat out lies.

But the parts about Knight-Captain Cullen Stanton Rutherford? All true. Varric had not made one single thing up at all.

It certainly wasn't the whole truth. Varric has left out that Meredith had once been charismatic, smart and politically savvy. Grand Cleric Elthina was kind but feckless. Viscount Dumar was completely incompetent. Orsino had studied and eventually succumbed to blood magic. Meredith might have ruled over Kirkwall with an iron fist, but the fact was that, until red lyrium became involved, she'd kept the peace in one of the most violent cities in Thedas.

But none of that—and very little of Cullen's personal history at Kinloch—was in Varric's book. No, all the Herald would read was, “Mages cannot be treated like people. They are not like you and me,” followed by years of him never questioning Meredith as she wielded the brand for petty
infractions, like falling in love and writing letters.

Cullen laid down Cassandra's letter, rubbed his eyes and thought of lyrium.

***

Slowly but surely, Cullen was building a reasonably sized, fairly disciplined army, his men learning not just how to fight, but how to count on each other.

Fights broke out, certainly, but Cullen had his ways of making soldiers work out their differences. It usually involved conquering a mutual enemy, even if that “enemy” was just a filthy stable that needed to be conquered with soap and water. He'd recently resolved one conflict by making three soldiers figure out a way to ice fish on the nearby lake.

If only every confrontation could be resolved so simply.

That swindler arsehole Seggritt was price gouging on everything. Cullen couldn't give a damn about the trinkets and clothing, but Seggritt was also refusing to take anything except his asking prices on medicinal herbs for potions. Any attempt to reason with him (or, in Cullen's case, threaten him) resulted in an increase in price.

It was shameful, what the man was doing. He would sell a little to Adan, whenever Adan could afford it. The rest, he hoarded. When somebody needed potion because they were sick, or their loved one was sick or injured, Adan would have to explain why he lacked the ingredients.

The family would then go to Seggritt. Sometimes they could afford to the ingredients, and take them to Adan, who would make the potion, usually for free because they often had no money left after that.

If they could not, their loved one would suffer, and sometimes die.

Cullen wanted him thrown into the dungeon, and his stocks confiscated and distributed fairly. He was overruled by Josephine and Leliana. They had no other merchant set up at the moment. Throwing him in jail, or killing him, would make it that much harder for the Inquisition to make purchasing contracts in the future.

But the problems with Seggritt were nothing compared to the mages and Templars in Haven who, by way of luck or circumstance, had not been at the Conclave when it exploded.

Both groups were small, stubborn, and undisciplined. The Templars were running short on lyrium and temper. The mages were adrift without a First Enchanter. Arguments happened every damn day. Cullen was usually the only one who could prevent bloodshed.

One morning, as he was in the War Room writing reports, Josephine informed him that the Herald and her party had just arrived back in Haven. They would all have a meeting shortly. He put his papers away and left to go find Cassandra. He wanted to speak with her privately about her concerns over the Herald's magic.

He walked out of the Chantry, and into the middle of an argument between the mages and Templars, over who was most at fault for the death of the Divine.

Cullen broke up the fight, pointing out that they were all on the same side now, all part of the Inquisition. Tempers were running high, so Cullen had to both shove the idiots as well as shout them down.
Then he saw the Herald standing on one side of the crowd, frowning at the entire mess, while Chancellor Roderick stood to the other side, looking like his Nameday had come early.

*Maker take me,* Cullen thought, as he shooed the mages and Templars away like wayward school children. Roderick pontificated that the Inquisition was failing in its promise to restore order, and not so subtly offered himself as a “proper authority.” For good measure, he accused the Herald of both murder and heresy.

“I am not the Herald of anything!” she said, clearly exasperated. “I do not even believe in your Maker.”

Not surprisingly, this did not calm Roderick down. He added blasphemy to the charges of heresy and murder, and told her she should be tried and executed.

The Herald looked at Roderick, contempt in her eyes, and pointed to the Breach. “I have other duties, priest. You want to put me on trial, at least save your own planet first.”

Roderick sputtered in confusion at her odd response. Then, blessedly, he left.

The Herald looked at Cullen. “It has been like this every day, Commander?”

He couldn’t tell if she was genuinely concerned, or just digging for a way to criticize his ability to lead. He gave a safe answer. “Mages and Templars have always been at each other’s throats. And Roderick is a good indication of what to expect when you go to Val Royeaux.”
She quietly sighed in resignation, but said only, “We have a meeting now, yes?”

They walked towards the War Room in awkward silence, until Mother Giselle saw the Herald, and came over to give her a warm embrace. “Hello, child. It is good to see you again.”

Cullen continued to the War Room, gratefully leaving the two women behind to talk.

It took a few minutes for everyone to arrive—Josephine had to pull the Herald away from Mother Giselle, who appeared to be giving the Herald a list of herbs she needed. Once they were all present, Cullen expected Cassandra to open the meeting by giving an accounting of what they had accomplished in the Hinterlands.

To his surprise, the Herald did that. Pointing to the map, in heavily accented but mostly fluent Common, she set forth what they had done. Slavers, apostates and Templars, and where they’d been killed. The location and number of Inquisition camps they’d set up. A run in with a demon wolf pack. And rift after rift after rift.

It was hard to believe that this efficient woman had stood before him only a month earlier, in barbarian furs, barely able to speak the language.

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Commander?”

Oh, Maker, did I just said that to the room? He must have. Cassandra was glaring at him, while Leliana and Josephine looked amused.

“I just mean to say that, um, you seem to have become very fluent, very quickly.”

“I had help,” she said, “but thank you.”

They moved on to their next steps. Leliana and Cassandra wanted the Herald to head to Val Royeaux right away to meet with the Chantry mothers.

The Herald pushed back. “No. The ground team has been on the road for over 30 days. Varric and Solas are civilians. Either Cassandra and I go alone tomorrow, or we rest for three days and then go together.”

Cullen didn't like her snotty tone. “Technically, you're a civilian, too.”

The Herald glared at him. “Technically, I was arrested, ordered to fight, and have never been paid. That makes me a conscript.” She thought for a moment, and asked, “Are Solas and Varric being paid?”

Cullen had never seen Leliana, Josephine, and Cassandra all flustered, all at the same time. They looked at each other as if hoping one of them would have an answer.

“That is not right!” the Herald scolded. “Those men risk their lives every day, and they have saved mine.”

“I will see to it right away, Herald,” Josephine said.

The Herald nodded once, and they moved to other topics.

Leliana had not found her bracelet (the Herald called it something else, some odd word in that incomprehensible tongue of hers), nor had her ship been located. However, weather had been bad, and Leliana's scouts had only been able to look for the last few days.
Cassandra discussed the needs of the people in the Hinterlands. Horsemaster Dennet needed security towers, there were bandits and mercenaries to put down, and red lyrium was growing all over the place.

Josephine listed the concerns of several noble houses. Cullen had no interest in the discussion, so his mind wandered. Judging by the look on the Herald's face, she felt the same.

The Herald wanted to inspect the infirmary. Finally, she announced that she and her team would leave for Val Royeaux in three days. Cassandra did not object.

The meeting adjourned. Josephine went back to her office, Leliana went back to her plotting and the Herald left the Chantry with Mother Giselle in tow.

Cullen closed the door to the war room, leaving only himself and Cassandra. “All right, I read your letter. How concerned are you about her magic?”

Cassandra looked a little confused. "She is not invincible, if that is what you mean."

“Is she dangerous?”

“Absolutely. She is incredibly powerful, and her magic is unlike anything I have ever seen.”

“What should we do?”

“Nothing.”

Cullen gaped at her. “Nothing?” he said, incredulously. “Cassandra, you specifically wrote to me just to tell me that her magic terrified you!”

“No, Cullen. I specifically wrote because you had not written to me, as you had promised to do,” Cassandra said, in an unnecessarily bossy tone. “But it is true that her magic is terrifying, just not in the way you are thinking.”

“What do you mean?”

Cassandra knit her brows in concentration. “What she does should be impossible, even for a mage. She jumps off cliffs and lands without injury. She crushes enemies inside their own armor. She has thrown men so high into the air that they would have cleared the tallest towers in Val Royeaux.”

“Is there any way to counteract it?”

“Brute force. She is strong but she bleeds like anybody else, Cullen. She has taken her share of injuries.”

“Do you think she is in any danger of possession?”

Cassandra frowned. “I do not believe so. Perhaps you should speak with the Herald directly, and let her know your concerns.”

His skepticism must have shown on his face because Cassandra got rather scoldy. “Get to know her before you decide to simply dislike her on principle, Cullen. She is not bloodthirsty, or proud, or violent. If anything, she goes out of her way to help. And she is committed to closing the Breach. That is all that matters.”

They talked for a bit longer. He told her about his symptoms and the run in with Roderick earlier. She complained about Varric, and said that the Herald's world sounded fantastical and strange.
They parted ways. Cullen headed to the training yard, and spent the rest of the day with his men. It helped, losing himself in the honest routine of hard work.

It didn't take away the craving for lyrium. But it helped.

Chapter End Notes

I originally posted this chapter without thanking my betas. This was WRONG of me, as my betas are awesome people who spend a great deal of time and trouble helping me organize the chaos that is Half-Life. So, to my betas, thank you so much. I appreciate everything you do.
Chapter sixteen

Chapter Summary

Helen loses patience with the state of things in Haven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter sixteen

The only good thing she could say about the infirmary (a collection of mismatched cots in filthy, weather-beaten tents) was that it was currently empty.

The bad news? It was empty because its last patient had died from infection only a few days before.

Dirty water. No soap. Nothing sterilized. Bandages were taken from the dead and reused without bothering to even rinse them out. And it reeked.

She tried not to lose her shit, but there was really no other way to describe her reaction. She did have the presence of mind to lose her shit in English, so at least nobody was explicitly offended.

Mother Giselle told her that most people either used mages as healers, or potions (or both). The handful of mages in Haven were either unable or unwilling to help, except Solas, who had been traveling with the Herald. Adan gave Mother Giselle as much potion as he could, but his supply was very limited.

In either case, she explained to Helen, basic sanitation was not something that “the country people” were used to practicing.

Helen found a runner and told him to bring Adan to her.

While they waited, Helen called over Quartermaster Threnn. Helen explained that she needed to be able to clean and boil blankets, sheets, clothing, bandages and surgical instruments (which were little more than knives and bone saws) every day. What would that require in manpower and resources?

Threnn told her, “We have the manpower, but there aren't enough laundry kettles in Haven as it is. We could purchase some, I suppose, but they won't be here for weeks. Maybe Harritt could make one? I'm not a blacksmith, so I don't know.”

Adan arrived and explained that the primary reason he was unable to spare more than he did was because, “that greedy, buck-toothed bastard Seggritt has most of the ingredients I need. His prices start at 'robbery' and go all the way to 'sodomy.'”

Helen thanked them all. Then she left to find Leliana.

The good Sister was praying in her tent. Helen waited patiently until she was done. Leliana was apparently having a crisis of faith over the Death of the Divine. “What good is the Maker,” she
Helen thought the Maker was superstitious claptrap, so her answer was mostly a shrug. After Leliana had calmed down, Helen explained the situation with the infirmary, and the mages, and Adan, and Seggritt.

Leliana was already aware of the problem. “The mages tell me that they are afraid the Templars will attack them for using magic, and I cannot say they are wrong.

“As for Seggritt, he is the only merchant willing to be here. He claims he's already selling at a discount, which complete nonsense. But he won't come down on his prices. Even Varric's connections won't bring anybody out here.”

“I see,” Helen said, frowning. “Thank you, Leliana.”

It was nearly sunset by now. She tracked down Varric. “Let's talk over dinner,” he said, and he took her to the tavern.

Helen had not yet been to the tavern, figuring it would be dark, depressing, and full of people who whispered and stared at her. What she found instead was a bright, warm pub, where Varric was a celebrity. Helen received more than a few curious looks and one Chantry sister, deep in her cups, slurred out a blessing. But for the most part, she was ignored.

Every few minutes, somebody would come over to their table, and start discussing shipments, or people, or intelligence, or whatever with Varric. She belatedly realized that Varric was conducting business. She quit trying to explain her situation and finished her dinner in peace while Varric held court.

Finally, when the tavern was much closer to empty, she told Varric her dilemma about the situation with the infirmary, and Adan and Seggritt.

Varric gave her a sympathetic look. “I'm as frustrated as anybody, but the fact is, nobody wants to come to the ass end of nowhere to set up shop right under the Breach. And we can't just take Seggritt's supplies, or conscript them, or whatever you want to call it. Because then he'll leave, and he'll be loud about it, and it won't go well for the Inquisition.”

Flissia came over to check on them. Helen ordered an entire second dinner.

“That's a hell of a lot of food,” Varric said. “You sure you can eat it all?”

“Easily. But back to Seggritt—can we order the supplies directly from somewhere else?”

Varric tilted his head to the side and stared off into the distance as he searched through whatever contact lists he kept in his head. “Maybe,” he said, but he didn't sound convinced. “If it was just elfroot, it wouldn't be a problem, but the best compounds come from places that aren't easy to get to, like the Anderfels, and the Hissing Wastes. Seggritt's a bastard and a crook, but he has sources. I'll look into it,” he promised.

“Thank you, Varric.” she said.

Her second round of calories arrived, along with another ale for Varric. Helen tucked in. “So. Ruffles stopped by today,” he said, oh-so-casually. “It seems that there was an accounting oversight, and I should have been getting paid.”

Helen looked at him as she chewed, but said nothing.
“I told our good Ambassador that I appreciated it, but I didn't need the money. And she said that it wasn't about need, it was about what was right. That I risked my life every day for the Inquisition, and that it would be dishonorable to take such a sacrifice for granted.”

She raised an eyebrow over the rim of her mug. She wasn't sure where Varric was going with this.

“Got anything to say about it, Herald?”

“Yes,” she said, tearing open a warm dinner roll and adding a pat of butter. “Did you take the first offer, or did you hold out for sick leave and a pension?”

He gave her a slow smile and tucked some wayward bangs behind his ears. "You sure you're not part dwarf?"

She smiled back. “I am sure.”

“Well, I still turned it down. I don't need it, and the Inquisition does. But I want you to know, it means a lot to me that you asked.”

“Oh course, Varric. You chose to stay. I am grateful to you.”

Varric kept her company while she finished her dinner, telling her about how Cassandra had first arrested him, and how some of the things that had actually happened to Hawke were so unbelievable that he'd left them out of the book.

When Helen was done eating, Flissa came over to take her plates and handed them a bill. “Put it on my tab,” Varric said, but Helen stopped him, and told Flissa to put it on the Inquisition's tab.

“I am not getting paid, either,” she explained to Varric.

“No? Well...maybe you're not part dwarf.”

**

Helen woke up far too early the next morning. She told herself it was simply because she was now used to such hours, and not because of another nightmare.

Just like before, Telina arrived with breakfast shortly after Helen got up. Helen thanked her and then thought of something. "Telina, how do you always know when I am awake?"

The girl looked confused as if it made no sense. "Well... you light a lamp, milady. We can see it in the windows."

Helen nodded, then shook her head. She was asking the wrong question. “What I mean is, who is watching my windows to see when the light goes on?"

“She Nightingale's people, milady. Somebody watches over your cabin all night, to make sure you are safe. When you get up, a runner tells me. I put your breakfast together, then I come here.”

Helen found that answer alarming for a number of reasons, not least of which was the idea that her safety was at risk. And then there was the issue of Telina herself. “Wait. Did they wake you just to... bring me breakfast?”

“Oh, no. Most of us in the kitchen have been up for hours already. Commander Rutherford and his recruits rise early, Harritt and his people are up, Flissa's usually awake, or about to be, anyway, to prepare for the morning crowd. And a lot of the Sisters eat before they go to morning prayers.”
That made Helen feel a bit better, knowing that she at least wasn't getting this poor girl out of bed. “Thank you. That is good to know. I appreciate everything you do for me, Telina.”

Telina looked uncomfortable, but she nodded her thanks and left. Well, at least she isn't curtsying and sprinting out the door this time. I guess that's progress.

After eating breakfast and getting dressed, Helen walked down to the forge. Although it was still dark, Harritt and his men were all up and working hard even as the sun rose.

"Heard you was back," Harritt said when she showed up. "Here. Come have a look." He showed her black leather armor, with chain mail, pauldrons and gauntlets armored in an opalescent metal. "And lookit this," he said excitedly. A wicked looking dagger retracted directly from the top of the right gauntlet. "You can remove it, like that, see? Take it out, clean it, sharpen it, what-have-you.” He gave her strict care instructions and a flask of oil. Then he gently placed the armor in her arms, like a new father handing over his infant.

After thanking him profusely, she asked him about laundry kettles, explaining why she needed them. “Hmm, yeah, I can spare the iron. But we'll need to build a mold first, which will take a couple of days. I'll have my men start on it.”

Helen took her armor back to her cabin and thought about her next moves. She needed to talk to Leliana, and to Solas, and to Cullen.

She decided to save Solas for last. The man liked his sleep and had been on the road for a month.

First, she sought out Leliana. She updated her on the progress for the infirmary. Then she asked why her cabin was being watched at night.

Leliana paused for a moment. “Because we have credible reports of at least four separate plots to have you assassinated.”

“Oh.” Helen wasn't even sure how to react to that news. “Is...that a lot?”

“It is four more than we want, but as long as the Inquisition is a player in Thedas politics, there will be plots. Most of the threats are just grandstanding and politics. The plot itself is the point, not your actual death. That is how the Grand Game is played. However, one of the plots is internal, right here in Haven. The guardsmen who were punished in the wake of Ivans death have been quite vocal about wanting to see you come to harm.”

It took Helen's brain a moment to remind her that Ivans was the Templar who had tried to rape her while she was still a prisoner. Honestly, her entire memory of that day was mostly just a blur.

“Is it a serious threat?” Helen asked. “Are they truly dangerous, or are they just complaining?”

“They are dangerously stupid,” Leliana said. “It isn't what they plan that we worry about. These men are not thinkers. It is what they do on impulse that has us worried. If they were to attack you...”

“I would defend myself.” Because killing one man in self-defense might be acceptable, but killing a few began to look like she was unstable or vicious.

“You see the concern.”

“I do. Thank you for telling me.”
She stopped by Seggritt's table. “The answer's no, Herald,” he said as she walked up. “I know what you're going to ask. My prices are fair. Take it or leave it.”

Helen looked at him for a moment, his little piggy eyes looking back at her. “We have a saying in my world. 'What goes around, comes around.'”

“This isn't your world, Herald. It's mine.”

Helen debated whether she should slap him into a stasis field to literally scare the shit out of him. But that was more likely to frighten the people she wanted to help more than it was to influence his prices.

Next on her list was Commander Rutherford. She made her way down to the training yard, where all the ground pounders were trying very hard not to hurt themselves.

Cullen was yelling at a recruit. "Right. Now block. Block. Block him! No. NO, dammit, not—don't do—Maker's sake, boy, IT'S A SHIELD, not a dinner plate. It protects you, not the other way around." The boy turned red but tried again. When he got it right, Cullen said, "Good! Keep at it,” and then moved along the line.

Helen had been expecting something like her old drill instructor from the Marines, lots of screaming and repetition and physical training. Cullen was certainly running drills, but his approach was more like an exasperated dad. He was...actually, he was rather good looking, when he wasn't scowling at her, or being a complete ass.
She got close enough that he could hear her, but not so close that she was encroaching on the training grounds. “Commander Rutherford?” she called out. “Do you have a moment?” The look of warm pride on his face was replaced with a sneer, his eyes went cold and his shoulders tensed up, but he walked over. “Need something, Herald?”

“Yes, please. I need advice,” she said, trying her best to keep her tone professional. Then she sketched out the issues with the infirmary. “The mages have said they will not use magic because they are afraid of being punished by the Templars. I have not spoken to either side, yet, and do not want to make accusations.”

“All right,” Cullen said, looking a little impatient. “So what advice did you need from me, specifically?”

“Do you believe the Templars would agree to leave the mages in peace so they can work in the infirmary?”

“Doubt it,” Cullen said. “Mage healers never worked without a Templar because of all the blood around.”

“Well,” she said, confused. “it is an infirmary, Commander. Of course, there will be blood.”

“Well, it makes it an ideal place to practice blood magic!” he snapped at her.

Oh. Right. “I had not thought of that. Do you we could convince a mage and a Templar to work together?”

“Why don't you go ask them yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me, Herald, I have men to train.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake!” she shouted in English, then switched to Common. “Adan cannot make potion because Seggritt will not sell the ingredients at a reasonable price. Harritt is going to stop making weapons for a few days so he can make laundry kettles from scratch. The mages and the Templars refuse to work together because their mutual hatred is far more important than actual lives.

"You are the Commander, no? Will you not even allow me to find a way to boil water? Then, by all means, hurry back to training your men, so that they can die bravely from sepsis! And dysentery!"

The soldiers had all stopped training to watch.

“And by the way,” she continued in a low voice, poking him in his breastplate, “your guardsmen? The ones you sent to bed without their supper? They have been openly plotting to kill me. Maybe, if you are lucky, you can add, 'allowed his men to kill the Herald of Andraste' to your resume.”

Cullen stared at her, shock written all over his face.

“Thank you so much for the advice,” she said, allowing her accent to get deliberately thick, and sketching a mock bow. Then she stormed off into the woods.

**

It took Helen a while to calm down. She used Singularities to create several dozen very large snowballs. Then, one by one, she Pulled them off the ground and Threw them into the sky. She gave some of them names. Clinton. Cullen. Seggritt. She muttered every curse in every Milky Way language she knew.
She felt, more than heard, Solas approach. “Did Cassandra send you?” she asked, not turning around.

“She told me the recruits were treated to a display of your fluency this morning. I came looking for you on my own.”

Something about his cultured voice made her want to come apart at the seams; to sob uncontrollably, or to scream until her lungs ached, or to smash boulders into the mountainside—anything to unleash all of the anger and frustration and grief she had inside.

But Solas had snapped at her more than a few times for saying or doing the wrong thing. Whatever he was, at the moment, he was no safe harbor for her.

She used her biotics to gather the remaining snowballs into a little wall, then slammed a Shockwave into it. It churned up the ground along the way and pulverized the wall into a cloud of sparkling snow.

“You do not use that spell very often,” he said, coming up behind her.

"No. It is powerful but inflexible. Once it is unleashed, it cannot change direction, and it obliterates almost everything in its path, friend or foe. The destruction is satisfying, I suppose, but I prefer the skills that let me adapt to my environment."

He paused for a moment, then said, “That is... surprisingly self-aware of you.” A moment later, he stood directly in front of her.

She looked up at him. “Are you here to scold me?”

“No. I was simply concerned for your safety.”

“I think I am safe from the goats, Solas.”

“From the goats, yes, but perhaps not from assassins.”

“Ah. Leliana sent you after me.”

His lips pressed into a line of exasperation. “Is it so hard to believe that I came here of my own volition?”

“No,” she conceded. “But honestly, I would welcome an assassination attempt right now. I could use the fight.”

“If I may make a suggestion, come back to town with me. We can spar in the training yard,” he said. “The physical exercise will calm your spirit, and your advisors will not worry for your whereabouts.”

She agreed and they started walking back towards Haven. She told him about her issues with the infirmary. “No healers. No medicine! No sanitation! Three things that could eliminate most infection and disease. Seggritt will not move on his prices. Cullen will not help with the mages and Templars. Harritt is helping with kettles, but that won't be ready for at least a few days. I had actually planned to come find you earlier, see if you had any advice, before I, you know...”

“Told off Commander Rutherford, at the top of your lungs, in front of all his men.” If she didn't know any better, she'd say that Solas almost sounded proud of her.
“Everybody seems to know there is a problem but nobody knows how to fix it. It is appalling. I lost my patience.”

“Haven is poor, fuel is precious, and many people here are ignorant about such matters. But you are right to challenge the status quo on this issue, Herald.”

“What would you do?” she asked. They had reached the lake edge of the training yard. Solas skirted around it so they did not interfere with Cullen's men. Cullen himself was looking over a report of some kind.

“Talk to the mages and Templars, as the Commander suggested.”

“But he never said—” Helen stopped for a moment, “he did actually make that suggestion. I heard his tone, not his words.”

Solas raised his eyebrows at her but said nothing. They walked the rest of the way to the sparring area in silence. He went to a barrel of practice weapons, and choose a quarterstaff for himself, and a wooden sword for her.

He brought the sword over and stood to face her. To anybody else, it would look like he was instructing her on how to hold a sword.
He said, in a voice so low only that they could hear, “The Commander is well aware of the issues with the infirmary. In fact, I heard that he wanted to throw Seggritt into the dungeon, and confiscate his stocks. I would also hazard a guess that the reason he is reluctant to approach the mages and Templars is because he has to break up arguments on a near-daily basis.”

“Then why did he speak to me like that?” Helen hissed, trying to keep her voice down. “I am only trying—”

“Because he is afraid of you, Herald.” Helen looked at Solas' face to see if he was joking. He wasn't.

“You are a woman abused by his own men, with magic he cannot overcome, from a world he does not comprehend. Now come,” he said, placing the sword in her right hand. “let us begin.”

“I do not know how to use a sword.”

“Then it is high time you learn.”

He spent an hour showing her the basics—stance, grip, footwork, and defensive moves. It was much harder than she thought it would be. She was famished by the time they finished. Most importantly, she had calmed down.

“Serannasan Ma, Solas,” she said as they put the practice weapons away. “You are a good instructor.”

“Ma ane a on lin'sila, Herald. 'You are a good learner.’”

And something about the new Elvhen words clicked into place in her UT.
Solas. His name meant “Pride.”

Helen made small talk with Solas as they headed back into town. She realized that this was, perhaps, the first time she had seen him walking for any period of time without a weapon strapped to his back. He walked with his hands clasped loosely behind him, talking casually but his eyes always on the move, taking in their surroundings at all times.

It reminded her of an Admiral inspecting a ship, looking for anything out of place. She wondered if it had anything to do with the threats against her.

“I understand I have you to thank for my new salary,” he said, as they neared her cabin.

“You do not need to thank anybody, Solas. It should not have been overlooked at all,” she said.

“Nevertheless, I appreciate it.”

They had reached the door of her cabin. Helen looked up at him. He was still scanning their surroundings. “Thank you, Solas. I needed” she almost said “a friend” but wasn't sure if that was the right term, “an ally today. It was kind of you to look out for me.”

Solas looked at her fully in the face. She didn't know if it was the sunset, or just because she'd never looked closely before, but his eye color was more purple than the blue she'd believed them to be. *I wonder how often he hears that he has pretty eyes?*

Then she remembered what had happened the last time she'd thought a man had pretty eyes.

Solas, unaware of her thoughts, inclined his head towards her just a little. “Good night, Herald,” he said, his expression gentle.

“Good night, Solas.”

She let herself into her cabin, and quietly scolded herself. *You are only here to close the Breach.* If she survived, she was going to get the hell out of Haven and never look back. If there was a spaceport on Thedas, she'd find it. If there wasn't... well, she really hadn't thought that far ahead, but wherever she wound up, it certainly wouldn't be Village Stinkhovel.

And if closing the Breach killed her, it wouldn't matter. Either way, she had no energy to spare for thoughts of pretty eyes on handsome men.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I owe massive and enormous thanks to my betas. Their continuing support and constructive criticism are the reasons I am willing to publish this story, instead of never allowing it to go outside.

I also want to highlight and thank someone incredible. ProcrastiKate (a/k/a/ AlwaysSleepy over on http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/) has rendered this chapter's last scene between Helen and Solas in the chapter. It is SPECTACULAR work.

Thank you, everybody, who is reading this work, and leaving kudos and reviews. I am
humbled and grateful for the support you are all giving to Helen. (she's going to need it.)
Chapter seventeen

Chapter Summary

Helen is just so over how things have always been done.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter seventeen

Observing the Herald and the effect she had on Haven was fascinating. It was like dropping a small stone into a stagnant pond and watching the ripples become stronger as they approached the shore.

She had secured a salary for him. (Solas accepted it, graciously thanking the Ambassador when she came to let him know. Most of his wealth was still locked behind eluvians, and he needed the liquidity if he was to expand his sphere of influence.)

The Herald had then demanded changes to sanitation practices in the Inquisition. And, for good measure, she had openly questioned the Commander of the Army in front of all of his men.

Cassandra had come to his cabin and told him about the confrontation between the Herald and Commander Rutherford. “I would allow her some privacy and let emotions cool,” she told him, “but I worry for her safety. And she seems to trust you the most.”

Solas had hiked out to the woods, half-annoyed at being asked to babysit, half-impressed with the Herald’s ability to upset the established order.

He found her easily enough. All he had to do was locate the place where snowballs the size of a man's head were being launched into the air.

Her emotional turmoil was obvious. So, he counseled, and sparred, and used swordplay to divert both mind and body, as he had once done ages ago for another powerful woman frustrated at her subjects' own stupidity.

Then he personally walked her back to her cabin.

Both one of his agents, and one of the Nightingale’s, were watching over it. He did not doubt the Herald's ability to defend herself but no person was invulnerable. Impressive as her barriers were, she did not cast them in her sleep, and he knew her biotics were no use against poison.

But for the moment, she was as safe as he could make her.

The Fade around Haven was busy that night. The Breach had calmed enough that spirits were beginning to return, like migratory birds after a natural disaster. Unfortunately, a couple of spirits had taken notice of the high emotions in Haven and were looking for a way across the Veil.

“You will not last long if you cross over, friend,” he told a Rage demon that was finding plenty of
emotion to feed on. “The people here are not strong.”

Rage looked at Solas stupidly for a moment. “I'm strong,” it said. “Me. I'm strong.”

“But you won't be once you cross over,” Solas explained patiently. “Your host will die, and the Templars will kill you.”

“I'm strong.” it repeated.

Solas sighed, and reinforced what wards he could, where he could. The Rage demon would likely cross over at some point, either voluntarily through a mage or involuntarily through a rift, but the longer it could be avoided, the better.

Solas quickly monitored the occupants of Haven that mattered to him. All was well. Cassandra and Leliana were dreaming, but Solas did not invade their privacy. Varric's life force was as strong and dreamless as ever. The Commander was still awake, working late into the night. His handful of agents were safe, some asleep, some awake and working.

He concentrated on the Herald's cabin.

Nothing except the Mark. Just as always. He wondered why he continued to look.

**

He took Mor'Lanun out for exercise the following morning. The first part of the trip to Val Royeaux would take them north, through the treacherous slopes of the Frostbacks before they reached the Imperial Highway. Solas was curious to see how his mount would do on the icy terrain.

Mor'Lanun was relaxed, happy and aware, sure-footed on both ice and snow.

At the stables, he removed saddle and tack, and gave Mor'Lanun plenty of clean water to drink. Then he used a quick spell to wick away any sweat. The horse didn't even flick an ear in protest.

“What a wise beast you are,” he told the horse in Elvhen. Mor'Lanun nickered softly.

He left the stables to find mages and Templars standing in a semi-circle around the Herald near the sparring area. Cassandra watched from her usual spot by the practice dummies, her hand on Cullen's elbow to prevent him from interfering. Varric wandered to stand next to Solas.

The Herald was discussing the infirmary with the mages and Templars. It was filthy and spread disease. They were under-supplied. Nobody seemed willing to make necessary changes.

“This is why I need help from both mages and Templars,” she explained. “But it is not enough to tell me that you are willing to work together. You will have to show me that you can be trusted, to protect your patients and to protect each other.

“This is for volunteers only. If you do not want to do this, you need not explain your reasoning for me. Simply tell me you are not interested, and you may go with my blessing.”

After a moment, a Templar who looked like she was in her late 40s, stepped out and knelt in front of the Herald. “I'm too old,” she said. “The lyrium takes my mind a little more every day. But I'll take your blessing, Herald. Maker knows I could use it.”

The Herald looked momentarily horrified at the Templar's genuflection but recovered quickly. She
knelt down in front of the woman, sat on her heels, and took the Templar's hands in her own. She spoke quietly with the older woman.

Was she doing it deliberately, going out of her way to make sure that she did not appear to be lording herself over others? Or was it an unconscious thing, simply part her nature? Before the Veil, he would have known her intentions immediately. Now, he could not tell.

The Herald leaned forward and whispered something in the Templar's ear. Then she stood and helped the woman stand up, as well.

The Templar stood to one side, as a couple of other Templars repeated the process. None of the mages appeared to want out. The Herald thanked them all, and they walked back towards town.

“Hey, Lanie,” Varric called out softly to the first Templar (because of course Varric knew who she was) “What did she say?”

Lanie wiped her eyes and said, “She told me she wasn't the Herald of anything, she was just a soldier like me. And that she was grateful to me for being honest with myself and her. Then she told me to forgive myself.” The Templar headed back into town.

“Forgive herself for what?” Varric wondered. “They've never even met before, have they?”

Solas, however, was too busy watching the Herald, who had divided the mages and Templars into pairs. She cast a barrier around herself and said, “This is my barrier. Listen to it for a moment.”

They did. “I can't hear anything,” an older mage said.

“Nor can I,” a Templar said, “What kind of magic is that?”

“It is not magic at all. This is called biotics.” She let her barrier condense down to a small rotating ball on her right hand. “There is no magic in my world. I am not a mage, no matter what people tell you.”

Keeping her right hand up with the little biotic ball, she brought up her left hand, as well. “This mark,” she said emphasizing with her left hand, “this is magic.”

Then she stood there for a minute, and let the mages and Templars reach out with their own senses and feel the difference between the two.

One of the mages, a young elf who looked barely old enough to have gone through his Harrowing, asked if he could touch the biotics, which she allowed. “Oh, my!” he said. “It's almost physical, isn't it? What are you doing, exactly?”

“At the moment, I am manipulating the molecules in the air to form a very small barrier.”

“You aren't pulling from the Fade at all?” a Templar asked.

“No.”

They continued to ask her questions about her biotics. A couple of the Templars even worked up enough nerve to touch the little biotic barrier. Solas glanced over at the Seeker and the Commander. Cullen still looked extremely unhappy, but Cassandra no longer needed to hold him back.

Helen vanished the little ball. “I am going to place a barrier over myself. Each team will have
roughly a minute to take my barrier down. You may use any magic or weapon you see fit.”

“Wait. What?” Now the Seeker was the one that looked angry, and Cullen was holding her back.

A Templar with a giant red beard asked, “Wot's this got to do with healin' people?”

“Nothing,” the Herald replied. “Why don't you and your mage partner go first?”

“Right, then.” he said, pulling his long-sword out of its scabbard. “C'mon, Hester,” he said to a
tired looking woman in vomit-colored robes.

“Do you want to discuss strategy together first?” the Herald asked. Neither did.

The Herald backed up to make sure they had plenty of room and were not too close to anybody

For the next minute, Redbeard wailed away at Helen's barrier, while Hester shot fireballs at it.

“Your time is nearly up,” Helen said. “Five-four-three-two-one. Time.” Just as she got to the end,
the Templar cast a Holy Smite.

Hester crumpled to the ground like an old sack of potatoes.

“Interesting approach,” Varric said.

The Herald made Redbeard carry Hester back to town. “Take her to Adan, please,” she said. “Good
man. Now. Who is next?”

Team after team tried and failed to break through Helen's barrier. People that tried to talk to their
partner ahead of time, were asked to stay. Teams that said nothing to each other but just started
banging away at the barrier were thanked profusely, then excused.

In the end, she had two teams. The Templars were both men. There was Ser Kason, who looked
like he was in his early 20s, and Ser Bennett, who was perhaps ten years older. The two mages
were Rose, a middle-aged human female, and Owin, the young elf who had first asked to touch
Helen's biotics.

“Congratulations. You four are now the Inquisition Medical Corps, 1st Division.”

The four of them looked at each other. Rose tentatively raised her hand. “Herald,” she said, “I don't
think you ever even asked the mages if we even have talent for healing.”

“No, I did not.”

There was a long pause.

“I see. Well, you should know that I'm not a healer.”

“I will teach you,” the Herald said.

“But you said you wasn't a mage,” said Ser Kason.

“Correct.”

“Oh!” Owin said. “You don't have magic in your world, right? So you're going to teach us
something else?”
The Herald nodded. “Yes. Follow me, and we will get started.”

She walked towards town, the four of them following her. Cassandra and Cullen both looked fed up, and followed as well.

“Herald,” Solas called out, unable to contain his curiosity, “may I join you?”

“Me, too,” Varric stated. Solas had no doubt the dwarf was mentally recording these details for his next book.

The Herald and her group stopped and waited for everyone to catch up. She made introductions, matter-of-factly referring to Solas as, “a member of my ground team. He is a healer, and a warrior and a scholar.”

It was, perhaps, the kindest description anybody had made of him in thousands of years.

The Herald led them to Mother Giselle, who was in the Chantry.

After introducing the new medics to Mother Giselle, the Herald then asked to see the new medics' hands. After inspecting all four pairs, she said, “Rose, your hands and fingernails are very clean. Tell me why.”

“Habit, I suppose,” Rose said, shrugging. “I'm a Free Marcher, but my father was Orlesian. He ingrained it into all of us growing up. By the time I went to the Circle, it was just something I always did.”

“I see. And how often do you wash your hands?”

“A few times a day. After I relieve myself, before I eat, like that.”

“Do you get sick often?”

“Och, noooo,” Rose said proudly, her Marcher accent getting a little more noticeable. “My family has always had a strong constitution.”

The Herald thanked her. Addressing the group, she asked, “What is the average life expectancy for the people of Thedas?”

“55, 60,” Ser Bennet said. “Most people won't live into their 70s unless they are wealthy, or live a fairly sheltered life.” Everyone nodded their general agreement.

“In my world, the average life expectancy for humans is 150 years.”

“Is it really?” Solas asked, as the others expressed similar degrees of skepticism.

“That's not possible,” Commander Rutherford said. “Not without magic.”

“We do not have magic in my world. We have science. People still fall victim to accidents, combat, war...but dying from an infection? It is nearly unheard of, and has been for centuries. Most diseases have been eradicated.”

She stood up a little straighter, warming to her topic. “Do you cook your meat?” she asked the medics. All four nodded.

“Why?”
“Why?” Owin repeated, looking at her like she was stupid.

“Yes. Why do you cook your meat?”

“Because raw meat makes you sick.”

“Have you ever seen people pour brandy or spirits on a wound?” She glanced at Solas then, amusement in her eyes. He knew she was thinking about their argument in the Hinterlands.

Rose said, “Yeah. It can prevent the wound from festering.”

“Exactly,” the Herald nodded. “My people learned ages ago that heat, soap, and alcohol can prevent sickness and disease. Wash often, especially your hands. Clean medical instruments with soap and water after every use, then boil them for several minutes, or soak them in strong alcohol. Same with dressings and bandages.

“Rose and her family may have strong constitutions, but the fact that the entire family learned early to keep their hands clean likely prevented them from becoming sick in the first place. And when they did get sick, they probably recovered well before their neighbors.”

“That’s true, now that I think about it,” Rose said.

The Herald told them what she wanted them to do. Work with Mother Giselle to make the infirmary, “a place to heal, not a place to die.” The mages would use the magical knowledge they already had—fire, ice, barriers—to boil water, wash out wounds, clean instruments, make cold compresses and to repel filth. The Templars and the mages would both practice basic first aid.

And, starting immediately, they were to begin washing their hands after every single trip to the latrines or use of the chamber pot, and before and after every meal, and after contact after or between patients.

Rose and Mother Giselle nodded in agreement. Owin and the Templars looked thoughtful.

“The four of you are your own unit now,” she told them. “That means you eat your meals together, learn from one another, look out for one another. Think about whether you want your own uniforms or insignia. Many people will not understand what it is you are doing, but if you do it together, they will be more accepting.”

In the meantime, she said, she and Leliana were devising a way to have Inquisition scouts locate and harvest sources of medicinal herbs when they were out in the field.

After a few more minutes of answering questions and giving directives, the Herald named Rose as “Senior Medic,” and left them in the care of Mother Giselle.

The new medics began talking among themselves, as the Herald started to leave the Chantry.

“Herald!”

She turned around. “Yes, Commander?” she said, her expression impatient.

“I would speak with you in private, if you please,” Cullen sounded like he was barely keeping his rage in check.

She glared up at him, only for a moment, before saying, “No.”

The Commander blinked once, incredulously. “No?”
“We spoke yesterday. You told me you have soldiers to train. I would never keep you from your duties, Commander. Now, please excuse me, I need to speak with Leliana.”

And with that, she walked out of the Chantry and into the tent of Sister Nightingale.

Now that the show was over, Varric headed towards the tavern, slapping Cullen on the back as he passed. “I think you lost that round, Curly.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes and walked into the Ambassador's office, closing the door behind her.

The Commander looked nonplussed.

Solas would not pretend that he liked the man. Cullen Rutherford represented nearly everything that Solas felt was wrong with the modern age—an unreasonable fear of magic, a history of leadership within a corrupt and oppressive organization, well versed in anti-magic, not to mention the simple fact that he was human.

But there was at least one thing the Commander was feeling right now that Solas could sympathize with. “For what is it worth, Commander, she does this to all of us.”

“Does what?”

“Challenges us. Demands answers to questions most have never considered. Hardly a day goes without her offending someone, but she asks in good faith.”

Cullen snorted derisively, and shook his head. Something about his dismissive attitude touched Solas' ire.

“Scoff as you will, but the Herald is trying to solve a problem that she did not create. She might not understand magic but she knows how to motivate people. If this experiment succeeds, the credit will be hers and hers alone.”

“And if it fails?” Cullen's tone was bitter.

“If it fails,” Solas' said coldly, “remember that she came to you for help, Commander Rutherford, and was turned away. Keep that in mind before passing judgment on her leadership.”

Solas turned his back on the Ferelden, and walked out.
Cullen tried to come up with a witty retort as he watched Solas leave the Chantry. Nothing came to mind. *You've just been put in your place by a hedgemage. Nicely done, Rutherford.*

His mind went to the box in his tent, his “just in case” dose. Maker, he was desperate for some lyrium right then, and the security it would bring his mind.

He sent a brief prayer to the Maker for strength. Then he managed the only way he knew how—he went back to his work.

He trained the troops that day with only half of his usual attention. He kept thinking about the
Herald, about what she'd done, what she'd said, what he'd said... Cullen didn't know what to make of any of it. He was just grateful that she was leaving for Val Royeaux tomorrow, and would be gone for a month.

That night, as he was getting ready for bed, he looked at his hands. There was dirt under his nails. There was always dirt under his nails.

Of course, there is. I'm a man, a soldier. He bathed once a week, as was Templar habit, and which was still more than most Fereldens. He tried to shave every couple of days, which usually meant his hands and face were subjected to soap and water every couple of days, too. And he may or may not use certain Orlesian products in his hair.

But washing his hands several times a day? Cleaning under his nails? It seemed silly.

Still—150 years. Cullen was thirty years old. Even if he survived the war, the Breach, and lyrium withdrawal, his life was already half over.

But in the Herald's world, it would be just beginning. What would I do, if I had that much time, or even just an extra ten or twenty years?

He found his soap and a flannel, poured water into his basin, and thoroughly washed his hands, making sure to scrape the dirt from under his nails. It took more effort than he'd expected. When he was finished, he looked at his hands.
They were still calloused, and scarred, and ordinary. Across the depths of memory, his heard his mother tell him, “You have your father's hands, Cullen.” He'd only been six or seven when she'd told him that, and it had made him so proud. He still remembered how strong his father's hands had been, as he'd guided the plow deep into the soil.

Cullen's hands trembled, and he thought—*lyrium*.

He sighed and pushed thoughts of his parents away. He missed them deeply. He carried an ocean of regret over his absence after they'd died. But he would not deny that, at times like this, he was grateful that they were not here to see the depths he'd sunk to.

His parents had given him, their oldest son, to the Templars believing he would become the fierce and loyal protector he had always dreamed of becoming. And after eighteen years, the best thing he could say was that he had never actually committed abuse.

Even that didn't count, because Maker knew he had certainly never prevented any. How many times had he seen a mage kneeling before a Kirkwall Templar, who was unbuckling his sword belt? How many times had Cullen had walked quickly past, pretending not to see, telling himself that it was consensual?

And then there was his lowest moment of his entire life—arguing for the annulment of the entire Circle of Kinloch. The mages who had survived Uldred were innocent of any wrongdoing—he knew that now. But at the time, all he saw were blood mages, even the children as young as nine.

The look on Solona's face...well, not that it mattered much. She was the Hero of Ferelden, and had run off to Maker-only-knew where with her elven lover. Whatever she was doing now, he was quite certain she was not wasting her time wondering about him.
As for Kirkwall, if Cullen spent all of his time listing his mistakes in that city, he'd never have time for anything else. Even Hawke had told him to lighten up.

Both men had been close to people who committed atrocities right under their noses. But while Cullen had found his backbone in time to stand with Hawke in the end against Meredith, Garrett had killed Anders—his lover—by his own hand in order to protect Kirkwall from even further ruination.

So, yes—if anybody could relate to how Cullen felt, it was Garrett Hawke.

Cullen and Garrett had worked together after the Chantry explosion to rebuild the city. Hawke was smug, sarcastic, and liked to needle Cullen, but he was one of the few mages Cullen implicitly trusted to never succumb to either blood magic or possession.

That was why, when Garrett had shown up one day and said, “I'm leaving with Carver,” Cullen's only advice had been to make sure that they had a steady supply of lyrium for younger Hawke. The Hawke brothers had never returned, and the post of Viscount was still vacant.

Now Cullen found himself once more in the orbit of a powerful mage.

But unlike Solona Amell, whom he'd once fancied, and unlike Garrett Hawke, whom he'd genuinely liked, he had no frame of reference for the Herald of Andraste. She was strange, and dangerous, and seemed so very apart from all the rest of them.

She also hated him.

Cullen looked down at his newly clean hands, which were clasped together as if in prayer.

He blew out the candles and knelt down in the dark next to his cot.

“O Maker, hear my cry. Guide me through the blackest nights...”

Chapter End Notes

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. They gave me a TON of feedback for this chapter.

And I've been blessed with yet two more ridiculously amazing renders by ProcrastiKate (http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/). She has given us something we never get in the actual game:
1) Solas and Cullen interacting, and 2) Cullen in his tent. (Also, Cullen's shirt appears to have gone missing in the second one. I may or may not have made that suggestion.)

Thank you, everybody, for your continued support and comments on this story. It means more to me than I can possibly express.
Chapter eighteen

Chapter Summary

Helen has a nightmare.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter eighteen

Helen sat at her desk, running wetware algorithms that were *supposed* to simulate the presence of biotics, but her numbers were off, *again*.

Katarina Kowalski stuck her head in side Helen's office. “Hey, Trey! You hungry?”

“Always,” Helen grinned as she kept typing.

“It's noon somewhere. Let's eat.”

Helen stood up and turned around. Kat stood in the doorway, wearing iron-plated armor, with an eye etched into the breastplate. They headed towards the elevator. Owin passed them in the hallway, with a clipboard in his hand. Varric was signing one of his books for the very flustered, very star-struck receptionist.

She and Kat stepped into the elevator. Kat pressed the button for the ground floor.

Helen tucked her silver bangs behind her ears. *Where were they going again?* The elevator doors opened, and they stepped out into Haven.

“Hey, Kat? This is the wrong floor.” Helen turned to her co-worker, but Kat had vanished. The elevator was gone. Now she stood in front of the Chantry.

She walked through Haven, trying to remember what she was supposed to be doing. An Asari nurse stood in the infirmary, talking to Ser Bennet. A Salarian merchant manned Seggritt's table. Commander Rutherford and a Turian in heavy armor were training a mix of Inquisition and Hierarchy soldiers how to reload their service rifles.

Helen walked to the end of the pier. She was supposed to be doing something but she couldn't remember what it was.

The ground started to shake. Pebbles bounced around.

Then, with a blast of noise so loud it filled her entire being, Saren's dropship emerged from the Breach.
The whole town started screaming. Helen tried to press her comms to call for her ground team but —goddammit, her omnitool was still missing! “Solas!” she cried out. She looked around for her companions. “Seeker! Varric!” Her voice was not nearly loud enough to be heard over the cacophony.

She jumped out to the frozen lake to get a better view on the ship, frantically trying to think of a way to save Haven.

Dozens of dragon's teeth shot up through the ice, knocking her on her back.

Searing pain pierced her gut as one of the dragon's teeth emerged from the ice directly underneath her, impaling her and raising her several feet off the ground. She looked down at her stomach. Her clothing burned away and her skin charred black, as blue electricity began to crackle from her body.

“No, no, no, NOOOOOOOO!”

Helen woke mid-scream. It took a few minutes for the shaking to stop.

She didn't want to light a candle and alert the kitchens that the Herald was awake, but neither did she want to sit in a dark cabin by herself until it was a more reasonable hour. She got dressed in the dark, slipped out the side window and snuck around the back. Using her biotics to give her a quick boost, she quietly climbed up onto the roof.

If she'd had her omnitool, she could have used her tactical cloak to be completely invisible.

But she didn't. Instead, she sat very still, and hoped nobody noticed the crazy lady sitting on top of
a house in the middle of the night.

***

Helen met with the advisers a couple of hours later, just before sunrise. She was tired. It was too early. She wanted more coffee, and was already hungry again even though she’d eaten everything the kitchens had sent.

Basically, she was in a super bitchy mood and trying hard not to show it. At least the new armor fit well.

Most of the advisors had something to say.

Cassandra opened the meeting by explaining once again who they were going to Val Royeaux to meet, and why she felt it was necessary.

Leliana informed the group that she and Helen had discussed the issue of Seggritt at length the day before. Rather than look for another merchant, they were going to ask scouts in the Inquisition camps to locate and, if possible, harvest medicinal herbs for the infirmary.

Josephine said, "Herald, now that you are largely fluent, you should learn to write the language with precision. It will also help you to grasp the subtleties of the language."

Leliana rolled her eyes. “What we want is for you to start sending your own reports from the field,” Leliana said.

Josephine looked a bit put out. “That is not true, Leliana, there are many reasons why it is in the Herald's best interest to learn more than just the basics of writing.”

Helen shrugged. “You want status reports in my own words, and you do not want my writing to look like a child's. It is all right, Josie, I understand this.”

Josephine then counseled her on what to wear while she was in Val Royeaux to make a good impression. Helen's personal opinion was that what she wore was unlikely to change the fact that she was short, bald and utterly foreign. Still, Josephine was trying hard, and Helen would defer to the Ambassador's good taste.

The Commander said nothing. Not one single word.

And...after cooling off for more than a day, Helen could admit to herself that, no matter how angry she had been, no matter how unfair the Commander had been acting, screaming at him in front of his men had been extremely unprofessional.

When the meeting was over, and everybody started leaving, Helen asked Cullen to stay behind for just a moment.
His eyes narrowed a bit. She remembered what Solas had said, that Cullen was afraid of her, so she got straight to the point.

“Commander, I owe you an apology. It was wrong of me to berate you in front of your troops. No matter my feelings at the time, airing grievances in front of enlisted men is bad for morale, and disrespectful to you. I know better. I should have acted better.

“I am sorry, Commander. It will not happen again.”

He looked at her suspiciously for a moment, then seemed to relax his guard just a fraction. “Well, um...thank you, Herald.”

She nodded. “If you are willing, perhaps you could walk with me to the gates? It might help if your troops see us speaking like officers, instead of bickering like children.”

Cullen gave it some thought, his emotions plain on his face. He really didn't want to be near her, but he knew it would help his men.

After a moment, she raised a hand placatingly. “Nevermind, Commander. It was just a thought. I will see you when we return.”

As she started to leave, he said, “Wait.”

He looked awkward and a little annoyed, but he started walking with her.

After a full minute of him saying absolutely nothing, she said, teasingly, “I take it small talk is not your strong suit, Commander.”

“No,” he said seriously. “I leave that to Ambassador Montilyet.”

“No diplomacy training for Templars?”

“No.”

_Note to self. Commander Pauldrons has zero sense of humor._ If Helen had more time, she'd have taken it as a personal challenge to get him to crack a smile, but they only had a few minutes before she would be on her way.

So, she played it straight. “What sort of training do Templars receive?”

Here, finally, was a topic he liked to discuss. Templar education got them all the way into the training grounds, where his men were warming up in the early morning sun. Helen glanced over at the stables. Solas was there, saddling up his Forder, but Cassandra and Varric had not yet arrived.

“I still have a moment. May I ask you some more questions?” she said.

Cullen hesitated.

“It is only for a few minutes, Commander,” she said. “I will have little opportunity to learn about you after I leave.”

“You could just read Varric's book,” he said, his face neutral, but his tone caustic.

Helen wanted to take the bait but kept her posture relaxed. She and Cullen stood side-by-side looking out over the training grounds. To anybody watching, they looked like two commanders, overseeing the troops.
“Varric is a storyteller, not a historian,” she said. “I would rather hear your history in your own words, Commander.”

“My history is none of your concern, Herald.”

“That is true, but you have hated me from the moment we met. I would know why.”

Cullen’s jaw flexed. His ears turned red, but he said nothing. He just stared resolutely ahead.

Stubborn man. Helen searched her experience for a way to make her point without making things worse.

"The first time I killed somebody, it was almost by accident," she said, speaking quietly. "I was in a pub, waiting for friends. Two patrons murdered the barkeep right in front of me, and then threatened to kill everyone else there. They were very drunk, and they had weapons that could have killed scores of people in less than a minute. I used my biotics, and killed them both."
Cullen turned his face towards her. She certainly had his attention now.
“It horrified me, how quickly I had killed those men, how easy it had been to act without thought, even though it was exactly what I had been trained to do. Later, I locked myself away and sobbed for hours.

"My Gunnery Chief found me and scolded me. 'You took responsibility,' she said. 'That means being responsible.'"

Helen chewed her lip for a moment. “I do not know your history, Commander. I have not finished Varric's book. But I have seen enough to know that you are taking responsibility now. I think you want to do what you believe is right.”

He turned and faced her fully, hands on his hips. “I do,” he said, quiet but firm.

“I believe this,” Helen nodded. “I do not know why you hate me, Commander. But you should know that I do not hate you.”

Cullen exhaled loudly and looked at the ground for a moment. When he looked back at her, the angry, suspicious man was gone. In his place stood an exhausted general who felt personally responsible for the lives of every soldier under his command.

Helen knew how that felt. She straightened her posture, and said, in Common, “Officer on deck!” Then she snapped into an Alliance salute.

Cullen returned with an Inquisition salute of his own, his brown eyes solemn.

They both relaxed and Helen glanced over at the stables. The rest of her ground team was there, watching her and Cullen. “Best of luck, Commander,” she said, as she began to walk away. “I will see you next month.”

After a heartbeat, she heard him say, “Safe travels, Herald.”

**

The first day out of Haven was much harder than Helen had expected.

They spent nearly all of it picking their way around the ruins of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. The road that would eventually take them out of the Frostbacks and towards the Imperial Highway was covered in a dangerous mix of ice, snow, and debris caused by the explosion and the Breach.

It quickly became apparent that Solas’ mount was best suited to lead. Helen placed Solas in the front to act as their guide. The rest of them traveled slowly and carefully behind him, in single file.

It was bitterly cold. Evidence of the destruction and violence surrounded them. A few dozen dead—clerics, mages, Templars, scouts—still lay where they fell, half-buried in a shroud of snow. Their bodies had frozen to the ground before they could be moved. Now they could not be recovered until the thaw.

Helen had no idea when that was, or even what season they were in. But she knew the pain of not being able to bury your dead, and her heart ached for the families of the people they passed.

Cassandra spent most of the day looking like she was fighting tears. Varric looked immensely sad. Solas’ face was a grim mask as frozen as the landscape.

This devastation, all of this destruction and carnage—she was still the main suspect for this. The whole, “Herald of Andraste” propaganda nonsense may have convinced most people in Haven and
the surrounding area of her innocence, but the audience they sought in Val Royeaux had not been there when Helen had closed the rift. From what Helen understood, most of them were going to be like Chancellor Roderick.

By the late afternoon, they had skirted around the ruins, and had passed almost directly underneath the Breach. Helen's left hand ached and tingled. The mark wanted to connect with the Breach. Several times, she had to stop her hand from involuntarily reaching up towards the sky.

She noticed, as they got close, that several enormous boulders seemed to be free-floating near the mouth of the Breach.

*Nothing on this god-forsaken planet is normal*, she thought. *Why would gravity be any different?*

But this was not the time to ask questions. Helen kept her thoughts to herself, and brought up the rear of her silent, somber group.

They camped that evening on the mountain side. Helen used her biotics to build a windbreak made of ice and snow, which had the side effect of clearing the ground for a campsite. They pitched the two tents together so that all four would sleep together and conserve body heat. The horses were kept close and under blankets. It was far from cozy but at least nobody would freeze to death.

They did not need to rotate a watch that night. Their location was too inaccessible for bandits and if a rift opened up nearby, the mark would alert them.

Supper was a quiet affair. Nobody suggested that Helen read any chapters from "Tale of the Champion." Cassandra went to bed as soon as soon as the sun went down. Varric, Solas, and Helen all sat around the fire, writing. Varric and Solas wrote in their respective journals, while the Herald slowly wrote a letter to her advisors.

Although she was right-handed, she frequently had to put her quill down to massage her left.

Finally, Solas said, “Herald, is the mark troubling you?”

She shrugged.

“When you are finished with your missive, I will look at the mark,” he informed her.

She did not argue. Their proximity to the Breach likely had not helped matters.

Within a few minutes, she packed her things away. Solas beckoned her over to him, and bade her sit on his right side. He took her left hand in both of his.

“No wonder you are in pain, Herald,” he scolded her. “The wards have nearly faded completely. Why did you not tell me this before now?”

“I am not a mage, Solas,” she reminded him. “I cannot tell when a ward is fading.”

He looked liked he was about to burst forth into a snippy lecture, but when he looked at her face, his expression softened. He wasn't looking her in the eyes, she realized. He was looking at the bags under them. *Yeah, I bet I am a vision of beauty right now.*

“If you are still having nightmares?” he asked.

She nodded.

Solas frowned, but said nothing. Concentrating on the mark, he sent a lovely, warm healing spell
into her hand. Helen did not realize just how much her hand had been hurting until the pain had subsided.

Solas held her left hand in his own, and traced slow circles in the air above it with his right.

His eyes were closed, his breathing deep and steady. His new armor had a thick, soft, deep fur collar. And the man radiated heat.

She was distantly aware of Solas and Varric talking, their voices deep and soft. Somebody placed a blanket over her shoulders, but Solas never let go of her hand.

Helen drifted, warm and content, through a landscape of memory.

She was eight years old, at the top of the tallest maple on the farm, her father on the branch just below her. She was twelve, her mother showing her how to calibrate the wind turbines, and saying to Helen, "You're good at this." She was twenty-three, on the observation deck when she took her first trip to the Citadel, unable to speak in the face of the magnitude of what the Protheans had built.

The scene morphed. She was in the Ops center on the SSV Trafalgar, planning a joint mission with a unit from the multi-species Heavy Urban Search and Crisis Response. Helen's crew and the "Huskers" were going to infiltrate a Blue Suns compound on Zorya.

The Husker Commander, a Turian named Atticus, flirted shamelessly with Helen during mission prep.

The team got on the shuttles and headed ground-side. One of Helen's Lieutenants was leaning over the pilot's shoulder to look out the viewport as they approached the planet's atmo. "Lieutenant," she said. "Don't distract the pilot!"

He ignored her. "Lieutenant!" Nothing.

Helen stepped over to him, grabbed a shoulder and pulled back, spinning him around.

A pair of startled, violet-colored eyes looked back at her from behind the visor, his cleft chin visible in the open faced-helmet.

"Solas?"

The scene went very fuzzy, then vanished. "Herald," Solas was saying quietly, trying to get her to sit up. "Wake up, Herald."

"Why were you on the shuttle?" she asked him in English. Wait. She wasn't going to Zorya, she was going to Val Royeaux.

By the time she remembered exactly what was going on, Solas had maneuvered her into her bedroll. He lay down in the bedroll next to her. "Sleep well, Herald," he said. She dropped back into sleep before she could say anything and did not dream again the rest of the night.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you again to my betas. This chapter, as well as the next few, have been a challenge to get right. I also want to thank ProcrastiKate for a big assist on the first screenshot. She sent me screenshots of the in-game Mass Effect and DAI renders that I was able to use to make that scene. (For what it's worth, that screenshot was made using Procreate on the iPad. It's the same program I used for the Chapter 1 screenshot.)

Thank you, finally, to everybody who has left comments and kudos!! I love how incredibly supportive everybody has been towards Helen.
Chapter nineteen

Chapter Summary

Solas goes looking where he isn't invited.

A/N at the end of the chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter nineteen

“I am not a mage, Solas. I cannot tell when a ward is fading.”

Solas swallowed his temper. The Herald was not to blame for his bad mood. “Are you still having nightmares?” he asked and she nodded.

Solas worked on the Herald's hand, far more concerned than he let on. His wards should have lasted much longer.

He first pushed a healing spell into her hand to ease the pain. Then he began reconstructing his wards, carefully removing and replacing them, one at a time. After several minutes, he felt a warm weight all along his right side, breaking his concentration.

The Herald had fallen asleep against him.

“I don't think she's getting much sleep these days,” Varric said in a low voice, as he wiped the ink off his quill and rolled it back in its oilcloth. “I'm packing it in. You gonna be a few minutes with her hand?”

“More than a few, I am afraid.”

Varric ducked into the tent and returned with a blanket. He placed it over the Herald's shoulders. “Try not to wake the Seeker when you're finished,” he said. Then he went to bed.

Solas gently readjusted the Herald until her upper body was mostly cradled across his lap. This allowed him to keep his hands free. He covered her more fully with the blanket, taking care to tuck it around her feet so she would not get too cold.

Then he took her hand into his and went back to work on the wards.

Solas took more care this time than he had in the days after she had closed the Rift. Now that he had a better idea of how her biotics worked, he paid close attention to the nodules of the element zero in her hand.

The new wards looked stable, but when he stilled and concentrated on them for several minutes, he realized that her body was not dissolving his wards—it was absorbing them. Slowly, to be sure, but
certainly apparent once he looked.

Between the Anchor, which wanted to escape the wards, and her own body, which was absorbing them, it would only be a matter of time before they failed again.

As he worked, the Herald sank further and further into sleep, relaxing against him. Solas meditated deep into his magic, looking at the spaces in between the Anchor, his wards, and her biotic element. He would need to reinforce the wards from the Fade side. When he had done all he could from the waking side, he slipped across the Veil.

He expected what he always saw when he looked for the Herald in the Fade—the Anchor, and nothing else.

What he found, what he felt, was so shocking, it almost startled him back into the waking world.

He was standing in a room with curved, dark walls that seemed to be illuminated from within. The only furniture was a large, oval table. A dozen people stood around it, listening to the Herald speak.

Except not all of them were actually people. One looked like a very tall, very skinny frog. Two women looked mostly human but their skin was blue and they had odd protrusions where hair should have been. A few others looked something like featherless birds of prey, or maybe like the raptors that Solas had seen in the wastelands far to the west.

The Herald was leading the discussion with one of the bird-men. Bird-man spoke in a dual-toned voice that sounded harsh to Solas' ear. The conversation was entirely in the Herald's native tongue. He did not understand a word of it.

The Herald and her humans wore dark gray armor. It was sleek and made of a material Solas could not identify. It lit up from within, like dwarven lyrium runes. Bird-man and his people wore dark blue armor, of a similar material but with a different design.

Two teams, one mission.

The Herald touched her right wrist. A translucent, orange gauntlet appeared. She tapped on it a few times. Over the center of the table, the schematics of a building popped up, which the Herald and Bird-man pointed to as they spoke.

Solas might not understand the language but he recognized when an infiltration was being planned.

Everybody carried strange weapons on their back and at their hip. He wondered if these were the range weapons the Herald had mentioned.

Bird-man looked down at the Herald and said something to her, his mandibles flaring outward as he did so. The Herald said something in reply, her eyes sparkling, and everybody laughed. Bird-man nudged her with an elbow. She nudged him back.

It was the most bizarre scene Solas had ever witnessed, in the Fade or out.

But what shocked him the most, all the way down to his ancient bones, was how it felt.

The Herald's emotions sang to him. Everything she felt was radiant, clear, and strong. She felt the anticipation of the upcoming mission, the caution of an experienced commander, and deep pride and affection for every single person in that room.
She did not feel awkward, suspicious, or uncomfortable. *These other creatures were her peers*, he realized. In the Herald's world, in the Herald's heart, this was completely and utterly normal.

And yet, the Fade was secondary to this space. These people, those objects, this memory that he was witnessing—they were not spirits or wisps reflecting her thoughts or emotions. This was all being created by her, without any assistance from the Fade at all.

It was as if the Herald had traveled to the Fade and found it lacking.

Solas stretched his magic out over the Herald's space, looking for the edges of it. He could not find any. It felt vast, larger than all of Thedas.

A desire demon sidled up next to him. "Don't do that," it said. "Once she realizes she's dreaming, she wakes up."

Solas glared at the demon. "How did you get here?"

"I followed the light."

"What light?"

Desire looked at him, a smirk on its beautiful face. "You've been on the other side too long, Pride."

Its' smirk faded as it watched the Herald speak to her crew. "Just look at her, though. It's such a shame she doesn't need me."

"Who is causing her nightmares?" he asked.

"She creates her own," it said. "Sometimes Despair shows up and makes them worse. But she never takes anything we offer. She knows too much."

Then Desire looked shrewdly at him and ran a perfectly manicured nail up his arm. "She doesn't know too much about you, though, does she? I wonder if we could change that..."

Solas flicked a hand and banished the demon. It was a rude thing to do, and he knew Desire would eventually return, but he needed to observe the Herald without any distraction.

The Herald stood, her hip cocked and arms folded across her chest, listening to Bird-man speak. Her black hair shone. Her face and figure were slightly fuller than it was now. She looked comfortable here; her smile came easily, especially when Bird-man spoke to her.

Wait. Was Bird-man...*courting* her?

Before Solas could decipher the Herald's feelings on the matter, she issued a short, practiced command. Everybody placed helms on their heads and jogged out of the room. Solas clothed himself in a simulacrum of the Herald's armor and joined them.

The group took a stairwell down a couple of flights, armored boots clanging loudly on the metal steps.

The stairwell opened out into an enormous room, easily the size of the Chantry. There were two—carriages, perhaps?—with their doors opened. Bird-man stood next to one open door, and the Herald the other, waving their people inside. Solas slipped in with the Herald's group.

Some people sat down. Others stood and held onto handles that seemed to be there for the sole purpose of keeping one's balance. The Herald slid the door shut and took a seat.
Solas stood at the front, behind the driver. A long panel of runes stretched across the front of the carriage. As the driver tapped them, other runes would appear in the air right in front of him.

*Fascinating.* Was this more of the biotics that the Herald used? Or was it some other sort of – Solas’ thoughts were cut short when the wall at the far end of the room began moving. It opened up to reveal the night sky, darker than any Solas had ever seen before, but nothing else.

The carriage rose off the floor, like the aravels of old, and left the room.

And in the space of a single heartbeat, everything Solas had ever known crumbled into irrelevance. They were *above a planet.*

Heart pounding, Solas leaned over the driver's shoulder for a better view. The planet hung before them in the sky. It was green and beautiful and completely, utterly terrifying.

Solas could hardly think. He could hardly *breathe.*

Bird-man's ship appeared on the port side and took the lead, two rectangular pipes of bright blue fire pushing it forward. As they flew towards the planet, Solas leaned further in to watch. As the planet loomed bigger and bigger, his eyes got wider and wider. His mind was blank with shock.
Then somebody roughly grabbed his shoulder and yanked him around.

The Herald glared up at him, her annoyed expression one he recognized, although she usually directed it at somebody else.

Then her brows knit together, annoyance melting into confusion. “Solas?”

_Fenehedis._

He hastily removed himself from her dream and woke up. The campfire had mostly gone out. The Herald had curled up against him, their left hands clasped together. His right arm had curled around her body, pulling her even closer to him.

He gently began the process of sitting her up. “Herald,” he said quietly. “Wake up, Herald.”

She shifted and asked something in her own language, not really waking up. She let him guide her into the tent. Despite the cold, Cassandra and Varric had taken bedrolls the furthest apart from each other.

Solas lay her into the bedroll next to Cassandra and tucked her in. She was already drifting off again but he cast a mild sleeping spell over her anyway. Then he lay down, in between her and Varric.

He quickly slipped back into the Fade and looked for the Herald, now that he was not touching her. Nothing but the Anchor, just as before.
Solas opened his eyes and studied her.

He knew her people had traveled among the stars. He knew they had worked with many different races. He knew their technology was vastly more advanced than anything in the modern age.

He knew. But he had not understood.

*You old fool,* he thought. *You wretched, ridiculous fool.*

Solas rolled onto his back and stared up at the tent walls until sunrise.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

My betas were a huge help to me on this chapter. HUGE. For such a short chapter, it has a ton of lore from both worlds and they helped me keep it consistent. If there are any inconsistencies, it’s my fault, not theirs.

And holy smokes. How about ProcrastiKate's rendering of Solas in Mass Effect armor? I have been DYING for everybody else to see it.

FYI, and I only raise this because it came up during the beta process, the reason Solas hears everything in the memory/dream as being in Helen's native tongue is that she had a universal translator, and would have heard everything as English.

Thank you to everybody who has been reading, and leaving kudos and reviews and comments. I appreciate all of it and all of you!
Chapter twenty

Chapter Summary

Helen arrives in Val Royeaux.

Author's Notes at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty

It took two more days of traversing ice and snow before Helen and her ground team were out of the Frostbacks. The only good thing Helen could say about their journey was that her nightmares had not been as bad as usual.

Once they made it onto the plains, everything improved. It was warmer. They picked up where they had left off in “Tale of the Champion.” For a couple of days, they even followed a lovely stream that was so full of fish and starchy tubers that Helen did not have to dip into her trail mix. And once they made it to the Imperial Highway, they made even better time.

Everybody's mood improved—except for Solas.

Helen didn't notice, at first. They were too busy. Between closing rifts and pacifying bandits, the ground team skirmished several times a day.

She was also distracted by the first truly serious disagreement she had had with Cassandra. The Seeker wanted Helen to introduce herself to people as, “The Herald of Andraste.”

Helen refused but Cassandra would not take “no” for an answer. Their discussions grew increasingly heated. A week into the trip, they finally had it out after supper.

“Please, Herald.”

“No.”

“If you would just consider--”

“I have considered! My answer is still no. I will not do this.”

“But people saw--”

“People saw that they wanted to see. Look, Cassandra,” Helen said firmly. “I can say I am an agent of the Inquisition. I can use my real name. I can even use a military rank if you want to give me one. But I will not pretend I am a prophet of a god I do not believe in.”

Varric was shaking his head at Cassandra, so she turned her attention to Solas. “Solas, you do not believe in the Maker but surely even you can see the wisdom in introducing her as the Herald.”
Solas, who had been reading, looked up at them, his expression stony. He said, “Even I, a humble apostate, can see the harm in what you humans are doing. You present a useful fiction—that the Herald is both prophet and mage. She is neither. Yet all of her protestations to the contrary sound like modesty to the faithful.

“You have taken your lie,” he pointed at Cassandra, “and turned it into the truth. And you have taken her truth,” he pointed at Helen, “and turned it into a lie.”

And although his words accused the Seeker, his eyes were on Helen. Why is he angry at me? He knows I didn't ask for this.

But any question Helen had was short-circuited by Cassandra's protests. “I have done no such thing! This is a reasonable interpretation of what happened and it gives the people hope!”

“It gives the Inquisition influence, you mean,” Helen said.

“Which we will desperately need if we are to continue our work once the Breach is closed,” Cassandra said, completely unperturbed by Helen's characterization.

“Once the Breach is closed, I am leaving.”

“Leaving?” Cassandra demanded. “Where do you plan to go?”

“To find a way off this planet.”

Varric and Cassandra looked at her like she'd grown another head but Solas said, “Assuming, of course, that you survive.”

“Yes,” she said, “assuming I survive.”

Helen herself had doubts that she would survive the closing the Breach. Closing that rift in the Temple had nearly killed her. She truly did not see why adding more power through her nervous system was likely to improve her odds.

Still—it was a dick thing for him to say.

After that, she paid closer attention to Solas. He was as solid as always in combat. He answered questions. He was polite, for the most part.

Otherwise, though, he had gone quiet. He no longer participated in any casual conversations, or offered his spontaneous opinions when she read from “Tale.”

If anything, he seemed to be trying very hard to not engage with her. If they found themselves riding next to each other, he would soon find a need to speed up or slow down until they were no longer side by side. When she asked him questions, he would give the shortest possible answer, then turn away.

Helen could not think of anything she had done recently to give offense, so she left him alone. Solas had never hesitated to express his unhappiness before. If he needed to speak with her, he knew where she was.

**

They arrived near the outskirts of Val Royeaux and settled into a small, modestly appointed manor that Josephine had secured for them.
It had what passed for running water on Thedas (pumps in the kitchens and baths). They all had their own rooms. After two months in Ferelden, it felt unbelievably luxurious.

Everybody retreated to their own rooms for a few hours. Helen took her time getting clean. Then she responded to the missives from Haven that awaited her.

The first was from Mother Giselle.

**Dear Herald,**

*I write to tell you that your Medical Corps are taking their duties quite seriously. Miss Rose managed to locate a copy of Brother Ian Avidcandler's "Anatomie of the Bodie Physick." Chancellor Roderick was most upset by this, as the book has been banned by the Chantry since the Steel Age for its graphic illustrations. He dropped the matter once Miss Rose asked him rather loudly if he would like to know where she found it.*

*Master Harritt has completed one laundry kettle and is working on a second. The Corps has boiled the tent and cot canvas. At first, they believed this to be a waste of time, until they saw the resulting water.*

*However, we are still running short on supplies, detailed in the attached list. Perhaps you may come across them in your travels so that we can replenish our stock of unguents, poultices and the like.*

*May the Maker bless you in all His fullness and protect you during your journeys,*

*Mother Giselle*

Not coincidentally, Josephine had written to tell her that the Inquisition had a modest line of credit at a couple of shops in Val Royeaux, should they feel the need to purchase sundries. Helen wrote them both back, thanking them profusely and stating that she would do her best to make purchases while she was there.

Then she opened the third and last letter, which was written in an angry, masculine scrawl.

**Herald,**

**Did you really create 'Company Half-Wit' in the Hinterlands?**

*C. Rutherford, Commander, Inquisition Forces*

*Oh, yeah.* Helen had forgotten about that.

She wrote the word, “Yes,” on the bottom of the Commander's letter and sent it back with the raven.

**
They took a gondola into the city center of Val Royeaux the following morning. For five whole minutes, the beautiful buildings, the clean streets and the running water soothed Helen in a way nothing else had since she'd landed on Thedas. Finally, civilization. She stopped thinking about the political buzzsaw she was about to face and started wondering if any of the shops here sold toothbrushes.
Then she met the people that actually lived there.

On Omega, an old Batarian had once stood at the entrance of the Market District and preached anti-human religious claptrap. The “Mad Prophet,” they had called him. He'd point at humans and shout, “Repent! Humans are a blight upon the galaxy! You, human, you are a blight! The lesser races will be our downfall! The word is clear!”

The only people that had listened to his bullshit were either human tourists who got offended and argued with him, or people who had recorded his act for their own amusement. Either way, his audience found had themselves drawn into the Market District, where they could be more easily fleeced by Omega's merchants (or, as Helen liked to think of them, “thieves.”)

The Chantry Mother who stood before a crowd and denounced the Inquisition reminded Helen of the Mad Prophet—ugly, stupid, and loud.

Unlike the Mad Prophet, however, people took Chantry Hag seriously. She called Helen a murderer and a false prophet, then stated, “The Maker would send no mage in our hour of need!”

*No shit, lady.* “I am not a prophet or a mage!” Helen shouted back. “I am only trying to close the Breach!”
Cassandra backed her up, saying they only wanted to close the Breach before it was, “too late.” Anything else the Seeker might have said, however, was interrupted by a group of goose-stepping Templars.

Chantry Hag pointed at the Templars and triumphantly crowed, “It is too already too late!”

A Templar punched Chantry Hag in the back of the head and knocked her to the ground.

“Hey!” Helen flared her biotics around her hands—punching little old ladies was wrong, no matter how obnoxious they were—but Solas grabbed her right wrist and held her back. “Don’t,” he spoke low in her ear. “You will only make it worse.”

Helen held her fire while Lord Seeker Lucius sneered his way through an egotistical monologue. One younger Templar protested for a moment but other than that, the Templars seemed to be in full agreement with the Lord Seeker.

Then he and his Templars formally vacated Val Royeaux.
Cassandra was visibly distressed. She knew him, she said, both personally and by reputation. This was very out of character for him.

And after all of that, Chantry Hag (whom Cassandra called “Mother Hevara”) still did not want Helen’s help.

The group left the fountain area to head to the shops, and Helen turned to Cassandra.

“Now do you see why I do not want to be called Herald? That young Templar saw an injustice but did nothing. That stupid, old woman would rather take a beating than help from a stranger. Your Chantry is rotten. I want no part of it.”

Cassandra looked livid. “I am not going to argue this with you right now, Herald,” she growled through clenched teeth.

“Well, you have to argue it with me sometime, Seeker, because I am not--” Helen was cut off by an arrow with a note attached landing on the ground in front of them.

Helen thought it was a rather clever way of getting her attention until she saw that the note was sending them on a scavenger hunt. She did not want the bother (“This is a giant waste of time,”) but Varric became unusually serious after he read the note.

“I’d take this person up on their offer, if I were you, Herald,” he said. Varric was never serious about anything, so they followed ridiculous bits of red cloth.

“A map to a courtyard at midnight. Seriously? Why not put that on the arrow in the first place?” She looked over at Varric. “All right, Varric, you know more about this than me. Do we spring this trap or not?”

“Yup.”

Helen trusted Varric but the ridiculousness of the situation was giving her a headache. “Fine. We will add 'ambush at midnight' to this evening's schedule.”

As they shopped, they were approached by a messenger. He had an invitation for Helen (and only Helen) to meet some Orlesian mage V.I.P. who lived in out in the countryside the following day. After the messenger left, Helen looked down at the card in her hands. It looked like something out of a costume drama, where even the cardstock was a status symbol. I’ll bet you anything this isn't even recycled paper.

Finally, as they were leaving, a small, middle-aged woman literally stepped out from behind a statue and asked to speak with them.

Her name was Grand Enchanter Fiona. She was the leader of the rebel mages. And she was there in Val Royeaux to invite Helen to Redcliffe to speak with her group.

Helen raised an eyebrow. “I just spent a month in the Hinterlands. In fact, I tried to go to Redcliffe and was turned away. Why did you not approach me there?”

The answer was a Gallic shrug followed by some Templar blaming. Helen's patience was wearing thin.

“We could just talk now,” she pointed out.

Fiona demurred, saying she needed to leave immediately and that she would see her in Redcliffe.
As the gondola returned them to the mainland, Helen said, “So, to sum up: A noble mage used a messenger to invite me to a party. A stranger used an arrow to send us on a scavenger hunt. And the leader of the mage rebellion traveled all the way from Redcliffe just to deliver a message for me to meet her all the way back in Redcliffe, even though I was right there in front of her.

“Did I miss anything?”

Silence.

“It is amazing anybody on this planet found the time to build a city.”

Solas let out a surprised little chuckle. He caught her eye, his expression almost...fond. After two weeks of brooding, she counted it as a win.

**

To the surprise of exactly no one, the midnight courtyard rendezvous was a poorly executed ambush. At the end of it all stood a mad, manic archer named Sera who said she was there for “her people.”

“Your people?” Helen asked, confused. “Elves?” she guessed.

Sera snorted, “No, people people.”

“Oh, I like you already,” Helen said.

“Right?” Sera said, grinning infectiously at Helen. “Not like this tit,” she pointed to the dead noble on the ground.

Following Sera's line of thought was a bit like herding cats. Her “Red Jennies” seemed to be a loose group of activists with no unifying purpose other than, “stick it to nobles.” Helen's questions about what the Jennies could provide the Inquisition made Sera visibly anxious.

Finally, Varric gave a quick tug on Helen's sleeve. “Welcome to the Inquisition, Sera,” she said.

“Yes!” Sera pumped a fist. “Get in quick before you're too big to like.”

After she left, Helen looked over at Varric, her eyebrows raised. “All right, Varric, I am trusting your instincts on this. Tell me why you wanted her.”

“The Jennies are useful if they're on your side, and a pain in the ass if you're on their bad side. They'll be in places that my network and Leliana's network can't get to. Besides,” he sighed, “my knees aren't as young as they used to be. She's a good with a bow.”

It was almost sunrise when they got back to the manor. Everybody slept in. That afternoon, Helen took a carriage to meet with First Enchanter Vivienne.

It took a couple of hours to get there. Helen let her mind sort of blank out during the trip and just enjoyed the rolling hills and scenic vineyards.

The Chateau itself was surrounded by beautiful orchards and horrible statuary. Helen was announced as, “Lady Helen Trevelyan, of the Inquisition.” More people were wearing masks than not.

A couple of party-goers peppered Helen with questions and prattle. Helen remained polite and tried not to be obvious about the fact that she was looking for the buffet.
The stuffed shirt who called the Inquisition, “a load of pig shit,” was hard to take seriously, even when—or especially when—he challenged her to a duel. She had just finished saying, “Are you serious?” when the man was magically frozen, just as he was pulling his sword from its scabbard.

“Madame de Fer” came slinking down the main staircase, wearing a luscious catsuit and killer heels. Her penchant for vicious showmanship reminded Helen so much of Aria T’Loak that she kept expecting to see armed Batarian guards next to the topiaries.

Vivienne was upfront about her ambitions. She saw the Inquisition as not only returning Thedas to the status quo but also as an opportunity to expand her own influence. In exchange, she offered her talents as a mage, and, more importantly, influence in the halls of power.

Helen studied her for a moment. The beautiful clothing and posh accent did nothing to hide a hard as nails survivor. She was not sure she would like Vivienne but she wanted her on her team.

“What have you heard of me, Madame de Fer?”

Vivienne arched an eyebrow behind her mask. “That you are a foreign mage who barely speaks the language. That you practice blood magic and butcher children. That you, yourself, sailed across the heavens just to cause the Breach. That you were hand-chosen by Andraste herself.”

“Oh, I had not heard the one about butchering children, that must be new. And what do you believe?”

“What I believe is not important, my dear,” Vivienne started but Helen cut her off.

“No flattery. Before I bring you onto the ground team, I need to know your truth. Tell me, Vivienne de Fer, what do you believe?”

Vivienne's eyes narrowed and glittered. She did not like being put on the spot like this. “I believe you are no more a mage than that plant over there. I believe you are an agent of a foreign government, although I do not know which one. And I believe that the mark on your hand gives you untold power in every sense, which needs to be kept in check.”

Props to Vivienne for brutal honesty. Let's see how she likes getting it in return.

“You are correct that I am not a mage. I am a biotic.” Helen raised her right hand and floated a ball of biotics above it.

Vivienne reached out with her magic—Helen could tell my the look on her face—and frowned slightly at what she was not finding.

“I am from another world. I landed on Thedas by accident before the explosion. I think your religion is nonsense, your Chantry corrupt, and your Circles unjust. As for the mark, its power is far more likely to kill me than anything else. Honestly, I do not expect to survive sealing the Breach.”

Vivienne's eyes had narrowed again, but more with speculation than anger.

“I am also former military,” Helen continued. “I run my ground team hard. If you sign up, it will mean long weeks on the open road. I do not care if my crew complains but if you cannot keep up, stay home.”

Vivienne thought about it for a moment, then said. “I can meet you in Haven in ten days' time. Will that do, Herald?”
Helen gave a slight bow of her head. “It will. Welcome to the Inquisition, Vivienne.”

**

Helen made it back to their little manor to find everybody still awake. She changed out of her armor and headed to the kitchen. “I am making supper for myself,” Helen announced. “Let me know if you want to join me.”

“You didn’t eat at the fancy shindig?” Varric asked.

“The fancy shindig required better manners and finer clothes, so I left.” Helen opened up the larder to see what was available.

Several bottles of wine. Eggs, butter, cheese, several vegetables she did not recognize, and corn.

*Corn.*

Helen picked up an ear and pulled back the husk and silks, to reveal dark yellow kernels.

Corn was one of the most genetically modified cereals in the entire Milky Way. The Initiative seed-banks had brought several dozen varieties because it was one of the few foods that both dextro and levo species could eat without causing an allergic reaction in either.

If she’d had her omnitool, she could have scanned it and compared it to the Initiative’s seed-bank database. She could have even seen how many genetic mutations had taken place and calculated how long it had been since the parent plant had arrived on Thedas.

“You look like you expect that corn to talk to you,” Cassandra said, startling Helen out of her reverie.
“We had corn in our garden back on Earth,” Helen said, as she resumed making supper.

Cassandra leaned on the counter and watched Helen prepare her meal. “It occurs to me that I don’t know much about you.”

“I don’t know much about you, either,” Helen replied. She handed Cassandra a bottle of wine. “You pour the drinks, I’ll make dinner, and we can change that.”

Helen made a veggie frittata with cheese and corn relish, which she shared with Varric. Cassandra and Solas did not eat but each took a glass of wine. Cassandra’s history got them through supper, although it was clear she did not much enjoy herself as a conversational topic.

Even with Cassandra's terse delivery, the Seeker's personal and professional history was damned impressive. Not only had she slain a dragon and become the Hero of Orlais, she had also acted as Right Hand to the last two Divines. Cassandra downplayed her Nevarran nobility which, given what had happened with her parents and brother, Helen understood.
“So, to sum up,” Helen said, “you are a politically connected badass. And a princess.”

Varric let out a bark of laughter and Cassandra turned a bit pink. She pointed her finger at Helen. “Call me princess one more time, Herald, and see what happens.”

“No promises,” Helen grinned.

“And what of you?” Cassandra asked as she poured another glass of wine for all of them. “You said your parents were farmers. Did they grow crops? Raise livestock?”

“No, they owned a wind farm.”

After a beat of silence, Solas repeated, “A wind farm.”

“Yes. You know how the people here use windmills or water wheels to grind flour? We used wind power for our machines, communication, water filtration systems..all sorts of things.”

“When you told us you were raised on a farm, I just assumed you meant a real farm,” said Cassandra.

“It was a real farm,” Helen protested. “We grew most of our own food. We had a chicken coop. We kept horses because interference from the turbines sometimes scrambled the engines of any vehicle that got too close.”

Varric shook his head. “You stopped making sense after the word, 'horses.'”

Helen found herself reaching for her right wrist and stopped half-way through the gesture.

“You do that a lot,” Varric said.

“I know,” Helen sighed. “I have had an omnitool for so long that I feel naked without one. It was the only thing I brought with me from Earth. It had pictures of my parents, the farm, Earth, space, other races...everything. It might have even recorded the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

Cassandra set her glass down on the table. “You truly do not remember what happened?” she asked, her voice quiet and sad.

Helen closed her eyes and thought back to that day. “My cryo unit was upside down when I woke up,” she said.

Then, for the first time, Helen recounted exactly how she had arrived on Thedas. She started at the beginning and didn't leave anything out, not even the embarrassing parts about Clinton or their history or her reasons for joining the Initiative.

Something about her companions’ stoic acceptance allowed her to tell the whole story without bursting into sobs. She was grateful for that.

“I remember vomiting a few times. I had stopped shivering, which worried me. The very last memory I have is activating my tactical cloak and sneaking into the Chantry.”

“What is a tactical cloak?” Solas asked.

“It makes me invisible for a short period of time.”

“That...sounds quite useful. Why I have I never seen you use it?”
“Because I need my omnitool.”

The four of them talked through a second bottle of wine. Solas was more relaxed than Helen had seen him in weeks. He sat to her left and did not pull away when their knees touched. Whatever issue he had been having must have been resolved.

Varric talked about Kirkwall. Cassandra held more than a little hero worship towards Solona Amell, the Hero of Ferelden, who had also killed a dragon, thus ending the Fifth Blight.

“Did you have dragons on your Earth?” she asked Helen.

“No, although there were *klixen* Harvesters on Tuchanka, which were basically the same thing.”

Then Solas asked Helen, “What do you miss the most about your world?”

Helen looked down at her hands and thought about it. “I suppose I could say something easy, like hot showers, or toothbrushes, or having more than enough to eat,” she said, “but honestly, what I miss the most is the people. I miss being able to walk through any spaceport no matter how small, and see a half-dozen different races, all talking and working together.”

“But it was not always talking and working together, was it? Otherwise, you would not have spent so much of your career chasing slavers.” His expression was intense, as if her answer were extremely important to him.

“The races mostly worked together for common purpose, good or ill,” she told him. “Criminal organizations were usually made up of all different races. It was the same with law enforcement. Most races had separate militaries but they would still work with multi-species units when...when they needed...”

Something niggled in her memory. She looked at him, this man who “walked the Fade;” who had been so stunned to learn that she had dreamed her entire life.

And all at once she realized that a startled Lieutenant on that mission to Zorya had not been a dream at all.

“You son of a bitch.”

She stood up, stormed out onto the balcony and slammed the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks are due, as always, to my lovely and clear-eyed betas for encouraging a longer-than-usual chapter. Helen has a lot going on these days.

I have also been blessed with another gorgeous render by ProcrastiKate. Her work can be found over at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/
For those of you who might not have seen it, Padme4000 did a beautifully rendered painting of Helen using her biotics. It is now in Chapter 10. Padme4000 can be found at http://padme4000.tumblr.com/.

Thank you to everybody for reading, commenting, reviewing and leaving kudos. Helen's story has really just started and I am so grateful to have all of you supporting her.
Chapter twenty-one

Chapter Summary

Solas copes with his new understanding of Helen's reality.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty-one

Two weeks earlier

Solas was an old man. He had known anger and joy, devotion and loss, triumph and defeat. He lived with a guilt so enormous that at times it seemed there was scarce room for anything else.

But never, not once, had he ever felt small.

Not until he had slipped into a human's dream and had learned that he was nothing more than a speck of dust in a world so vast he could not wrap his mind around it.

He spent that first day in a daze. He was grateful that he was still acting as the ground team's guide because being at the front meant that nobody could see his stunned, vacant expression.

The second day his mind seemed to start working again, albeit sluggishly. It no longer shied away when he thought of that giant, green planet hanging before him, in an inky black sky.

He found himself revisiting every conversation he had ever had with the Herald about her world. She had said that travel to other planets was common among her people but he had not envisioned it being so physical. What had they been in, that could float above a planet like that? And what sort of mission would require such a thing?

Solas nearly pulled himself apart internally, as his desire for new knowledge warred with the overwhelming feeling that he had somehow been deceived.

By the third day, he was blindly, stupidly angry. Did the Herald think herself wiser than those she had met here on Thedas? She was a child. She lacked even a basic understanding of magic. Her presence was an accident, nothing more.

So he pulled away from the Herald. He knew she would eventually seek him out to ask him what was wrong. That is what children did in such circumstances. He even prepared a number of aloof replies in advance, in order to keep her at a distance.

She never asked him anything. She just ignored him. That made him even angrier.

When Rage demons began to greet him as soon as he fell asleep, he realized he needed to get his emotional state under control. He sought out Wisdom and showed it the Herald's dream from start
Wisdom was enthralled. Those creatures were fascinating. That technology was so unique. The Herald was well-suited to command.

When they got to the part that revealed they were above a planet, Wisdom actually *applauded.*

This did not improve Solas' mood.

Wisdom looked entirely too amused when the Herald confronted Solas in his disguise. "It is not like you to be caught unawares. Is that what has you upset?"

Solas froze the scene at the point where the Herald had recognized him and slowly circled it, his arms crossed. "My friend," he sighed, "so much about this upsets me that I hardly know where to begin."

"Then let us begin at the beginning. Show me again, please."

Solas did. Wisdom stopped it after a few moments. The Herald and Bird-man were pointing at the schematics floating above the table. "This part did not upset you," Wisdom stated.

"It did not. I was curious and startled by what I was seeing, but my overwhelming emotion at that point was surprise at the sheer depth of her emotions."

"Which supports my theory, does it not?" Since Solas had awakened from Uthenera, he and Wisdom had argued more than once over whether the inhabitants of this new world were truly real.

"As the Herald is not from this world, I do not see that it has any bearing on your theory. In any event, that is an argument for another time, my friend."

They watched the desire demon arrive and try to distract Solas.

"That one is trouble. You were wise to banish it."

Solas shrugged. "It will be back soon enough. Although that reminds me—it said it had followed the light. Do you know what it meant?"

Wisdom raised an eyebrow. "Yes."

"Care to enlighten me?"

It sighed impatiently. "You look but you do not see, Solas. It is something you must learn for yourself."

Solas let the issue go. It was not important at the moment. "What do you think of these creatures of hers?"

Wisdom ambled around the table, looking with interest at everybody. "They are strange to us but not to her. She feels so comfortable with them."

"Yes."

"And that *does* bother you," Wisdom stated.

"It does."
“Tell me why.”

He looked at Wisdom incredulously. “Why? Look at them! They are animals. Animals! Yet she not only treats them as equals, she allows that one,” he pointed at the Bird-man who was running the mission with the Herald, “to openly court her.”

Wisdom shook its head. “No, not animals. Animals do not make plans.”

"It isn't even human!"

“If you truly believe that only the People are real, what difference does it make whom she courts?” Solas had no good answer to that and was not inclined to explore the topic further. He allowed the scene to continue. Wisdom paused it at the point where the Herald had pulled him back but before she had recognized him.

“This part bothers you the most.”

“Yes,” he angrily gestured at the others in the carriage with them. “Look at them. All of them! They are... gossiping! Looking at their gauntlets! That one,” he pointed at a soldier who had closed her eyes and rested her head on the shoulder of her fellow soldier, “is taking a nap! This wondrous thing is just outside their window!” He pointed to the emerald planet, then sighed and dropped his hand by his side, defeated. “And yet, they do not notice. It is ordinary to them. Boring. Even the Herald is focused on her command, on correcting her misbehaving soldier.”

He walked into the front of the carriage just to stare at the planet again.

“I had no idea a world could be so large. I honestly never thought of her other worlds as separate planets. I suppose I thought of them as endpoints on the far side of an eluvian.”

He gazed for a long time at the planet. “Is this what Thedas looks like, do you think?”

“I am not the one to ask.”

He looked at the incomprehensible technology that surrounded him. “Her world had no magic and no Fade. Yet her people accomplished wonders the Elvhen could never conceive.”

"They did,” Wisdom agreed, "but you knew this already. Did you think her a liar when she told you where she came from?"

“No.”

“Then why does it bother you now, when it did not bother you weeks before?”

“Because it wasn't real before,” Solas said. Then he closed his eyes and exhaled.

He opened them again to find Wisdom bouncing smugly on its toes. He inclined his head once in its direction. “Well played.”

Wisdom looked satisfied, then asked, “What happened after you woke her up?”

"Oh. Nothing of consequence. " Solas showed himself waking up Helen and putting her to bed.

He had not noticed at the time how closely he had been holding the Herald, or how tenderly he had acted, making certain that she had enough blankets and furs to stay warm.
He was mortified, to put it mildly, and waved the scene away. Wisdom said nothing, for which Solas was grateful.

**

Solas watched the Herald differently after his talk with Wisdom. Whatever he had thought she was before, he now saw, well—at least a real person. Not one of the *People*, certainly, but real enough.

He could not say that he especially liked Val Royeaux, but he understood it. The masks, the political machinations, and the social posturing all felt as familiar to him as slipping on a glove. The Herald, however, grew increasingly impatient with the layers of malicious intrigue that characterized the Orlesian capital.

He had no real quarrel with Sera. She was obnoxious, immature, and in possession of far more talent than sense, but she would be useful in the field. He would have preferred the Herald to not invite Madame de Fer at all, although he understood how her political connections would be helpful, especially to an outsider like the Herald.

Regardless of his opinion, there was nothing about recruiting either woman that would derail Solas' plans, so he kept his own counsel. Now he sat with the Herald, Cassandra, and Varric, drinking a surprisingly good Orlesian red.

Cassandra shared her own heroic past. Solas wondered if the Seeker was aware of how closely Varric listened when she spoke.

And then, finally, the Herald told them how she had arrived on Thedas.

Her career had not originally been devoted to combat, she explained, but to research. A civilian had been hired by her military to assist with that research. He courted her and they became lovers. He had been manipulative and controlling. She ended the relationship, only to learn that he had used his expertise to spy on her and her military.

Her promotion was postponed, her research was taken away and she was sent to chase slavers and mercenaries. The ex-lover fled justice but still followed her everywhere, disrupting her life whenever he could.

In the midst of all of this chaos, her parents were murdered on Eden Prime. The Herald only briefly described the invasion that had killed her parents, not mentioning to Cassandra and Varric that they had been impaled and turned into undead.

She did, however, give a few more details about the invaders themselves, describing the Geth as “artificial intelligence.”

“I do not understand that term,” Cassandra said.

“I suppose the closest analogy would be like a golem. Geth are built, not born. They have a collective consciousness, like bees, only exponentially more advanced. I am not afraid of much,” she said quietly, her eyes troubled, “but I am afraid of Geth.”

She spent another two years running missions for her military, the ex-lover dogging her every step. At a memorial service on the second anniversary of the attack on Eden Prime, he showed up and accosted her. “I beat him nearly to death in front of hundreds of witnesses. That was the end of my naval career.”

So she had joined the Andromeda Initiative but even there, he had managed to find her, asleep and
unaware of his machinations. He was caught defiling the coffin-like box she was sleeping in. Then he moved her into an escape pod and launched it into space.

After discussing what she remembered leading up to the explosion, she seemed to be talked out for a bit. Varric opened another bottle, as he and Cassandra carried the conversation for awhile.

Solas felt relaxed. He had a nice glow from the wine. His knee rested against the Herald. He found it...companionable.

Then his own damn curiosity did him in.

Now the Herald was furious with him and he had a new mess of his own making to clean up.

“Chuckles?” Varric was asking him, “Wanna explain what that was all about?”

Solas pinched the bridge of his nose. *Everything you touch,* he told himself. *Every single thing you touch.*

“My apologies to you both,” he said, standing up. “The fault is mine, not the Herald's. Please excuse me.” He followed the Herald out onto the balcony.

She stood at the railing, looking out over the Val Royeaux suburbs. She had put her hood up, hiding her face from him. She turned her head away at his approach.

He stopped a few paces behind her, took a deep breath and said, “Herald, I owe you an explanation.”

“An explanation?” She turned towards him. She was *livid.* Her biotics flared around her. Solas felt a spike of fear. The Herald was one of the few who could kill him while he remained in his current weakened state.

“You invaded my mind! You violated my privacy at a moment when I was powerless to stop it!”

Her biotics calmed, and she said, “I think the lesson I'm learning here is to never, ever fall asleep around men.”

It took him a moment to realize that she was comparing him to her ex-lover and to the Templar who had tried to rape her.

“I had no intention to harm you that night,” he said indignantly. “I wanted only to reinforce the wards from the other side of the Veil.” Which, he realized, he still had never done.

"By intruding on my dreams? My memories?" Her biotics flared again. "Solas, those memories are all I have left of my old life. My thoughts are my own. They are not yours for the taking."

He closed his eyes and sighed. “No, they are not. And you should know what happened.” He told her everything.
She heard him out at least, although she kept her face hidden from him. He wished she would turn
around and look at him.

Helen ran her palm over the balcony rail. “I thought you were one of my Lieutenants, distracting the pilot. My dreams often mix this world and mine, so I gave it no thought. Honestly, I was just grateful that I did not have a nightmare that night.”

The silence between them strained into awkwardness, until she asked, "Is this why you have been acting like such a pill the last two weeks?"

Solas did not completely understand that analogy but he understood it referred to him. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Solas sighed. “I have walked the Fade for so long that looking for people important to me is second nature. Not for the purpose of invading their privacy, but simply to check their life force, to make certain that they are well. Then I leave them be and I explore the Fade in other ways. I look for memories or talk to my spirit friends.

“I have been looking for you in the Fade since your arrival,” he told her. “I found only the Mark. I could not understand it. Here you were, a person of obvious intelligence and drive. Yet without any connection to the Fade, I believed you... emotionally incomplete.”

“Well of course you did,” she said, scathingly.

“I was wrong,” he said quickly. “It was not the things I saw in your dream that shocked me, Herald, not at first. It was your emotions.”

He remembered what he had felt that night. “You were confident in the mission you were planning; proud of your team; and deeply fond of everybody in the room, especially that...large bird-man.”

“Turian. They're called Turians,” she said, her voice getting thick but it held a smile. “That was Atticus. He flirted with me over open comms that entire mission. It wasn't serious; he just liked to tease. But he was fun. And a hell of a shot. I liked him.”

“You liked them all,” Solas noted. "Everybody in that room was your peer. I begin now to understand why you view elves, dwarves, and humans as the same race.”

She finally turned to face him, frowning. “Is that why you have been so upset with me? Because I am not racist enough?”

“What? I... no! The reason I became upset is because of what I saw when we were in that carriage.”

“You mean the shuttle?” She blinked, searching her memory. “Nothing happened in the shuttle.”

Solas pushed himself off of the balcony railing he’d been leaning on and stalked towards her. “You were above a planet!” he hissed, some of his anger coming back to him. “No magic, no Fade! To you, ‘nothing happened,’ but to me, it shattered everything I have ever known about myself, my world and my people!”

The Herald looked a bit perplexed. “Well...yes. We do not have magic or the Fade. We have science. You knew this already, Solas, so why is this such a problem for you now?”

“Because you humans and those creatures—“ Solas stopped himself from saying more.
“Oh, I see. It isn't that we did without magic that truly bothers you. It's that 'we humans and those creatures' did it at all. And your people did not.”

She looked at him, not a trace of sympathy in her expression. “Well... at least your name suits you. I'll give you that.”

Solas felt off-balance for a moment as that sank in. “Wait, how did... Herald, I never told you the meaning of my name.”

The Herald raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“And, how could you have possibly known that?”

She gave a sharp, cynical laugh, as she leaned against the balcony and crossed her arms. “How could the 'emotionally incapacitated' human with no magic possibly learn anything without your help? Like I said, your name suits you.”

Solas ran both of hands over his head and linked them behind his neck as he looked up at the sky. **Everything you touch.**

“So, Solas. What happens now?”

He dropped his hands and looked at her. "Now, I have to inspect the wards again and check them in the Fade. One of the many mistakes I made that night was failing to reinforce them from the other side of the Veil."

He could tell from her expression that she did not like this idea much. “You will still be awake,” he added hastily.

“What will you be able to see?”

“I might pick up on your emotional state but I will not be able to read your thoughts. The only thing I will look for is the wards.”

She chewed her lip for a moment before finally nodding her agreement. Solas led her back into the manor. Cassandra and Varric had turned in for the night, and none of the lamps were lit.

He sat them both down on the settee, with the Herald on his right. Like before, he took her left hand in both of his and checked the wards. And just like before, they were slowly being absorbed.

Solas slipped across the Veil—and nearly drowned in the Herald's emotions.

He could feel everything. Her heartbreak. The anger. Her deep love for the people and the culture she had lost. Her profound loneliness.

This young woman, barely more than thirty summers old, was buckling under the weight of a million ghosts.

He wanted to turn around and embrace her spirit, comfort her—but he had promised her privacy. And he still had work to do.

Once he inspected the wards, he saw they were reacting to the eezo. Specifically, they were redirecting the energy of the wards around the eezo and into the Mark. He changed the wards from healing energy to barrier energy. They seemed to stabilize, although he would need to check again in several days' time.
Solás opened his eyes. Helen was still sitting next to him, her hand still in his, her expression carefully neutral.

Everything he had just felt, she was holding behind a mask she struggled to keep in place.

He reinforced the new wards. “The nodules in your hand were redirecting the energy of the wards back into the Mark. I have established new wards but will need to inspect them in a few days time to see if they hold.”

When he was finished, he continued to hold her hand. “Does the mark always pain you?” he asked. She hesitated, then nodded.

He gently pressed both of his thumbs into the palm of her hand, applying healing magic while he softly massaged the area around the Anchor. She gave a small sigh of relief but unlike last time, she did not lean against him and fall asleep, believing herself safe in his presence.
“I have done you a disservice, Helen. I suppose we all have, to some extent, but myself most of all.”

He continued to absentmindedly touch the palm of her hand, although she no longer needed healing. “In asking you to save this world, we give almost no thought to the fact that you have lost your own. When we do bother to ask, we treat your history as little more than fanciful stories. They are valued for their entertainment, their novelty, instead of as an account of the remarkable woman who lost everything in coming here. I knew better than anybody else what was taken from you, yet I thought only of how it had affected me.”

He stood up, helping her to her feet, as well. Her hands were shaking, so he took both of them in his. “Ir abelas, Helen. I will not be so thoughtless again.”

She stared at their clasped hands until she had regained her composure. “Thank you, Solas. I will see you in the morning.”

Then she slipped away into her room. Solas stepped back out onto the balcony. He stared at the stars, lost in thought, until the need to sleep became too great to ignore. He let himself back into the manor and went to bed.

Chapter End Notes

I am deeply grateful to my betas for their feedback and help on this chapter. Getting into Solas’ head to gauge an in-character reaction to a non-canon event was very important to me. Dreadlorcheerycake and Duinemerwen both had invaluable insight
that helped me keep this chapter from being an incoherent mess.

The last picture in the chapter is another stunning render by ProcrastiKate. Her work can be found over at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/

Thank you to everybody who has left kudos, comments, and reviews! I try to respond to every single one in a reasonably timely fashion. (RL is bananas for me at the moment. I'm not complaining because it's all a good kind of bananas, but still...totally bananas.) I love the support that everybody has had for Helen.
Chapter twenty-two

Chapter Summary

Helen gets her hair back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter twenty-two

The second night on the road back to Haven, Helen finished reading the final chapters of “Tale of the Champion.”

She gasped out loud when Hawke gave Anders the mercy killing his lover had begged for. “That is a terrible thing for Hawke to have on his conscience,” she said.

Varric nodded, staring at the campfire but clearly seeing Kirkwall. “At the time, I thought it was the wrong decision. Whatever else Anders deserved, it wasn't fair to ask that of Hawke. But now?” He shook his head. “Choir Boy would have razed Kirkwall to the ground. Either way, Hawke was going to have blood on his hands.”

Commander Rutherford had, in the end, turned against his own CO and stood with Hawke to defend the city. As a former military officer herself, Helen understood how hard a decision that must have been. History was filled with far more tales of soldiers reluctantly obeying unjust orders than it was with defying those orders for the common good.

Helen also began to understand why people feared blood magic. Orsino's transformation into a multi-corpsed ball of death was right out of a bad horror vid.

When she asked whether that really did happen, Varric responded, “Kiddo, there are no words that can describe just how awful that shit really was.”

It also raised more questions for Helen about magic. Why was lyrium important? How did it work? Was blood magic inherently evil, like everybody seemed to think? Merrill was a blood mage but she had seemed all right. She was kind of a ditz and obsessed with that mirror but certainly not evil.

Still, how could anybody look at what happened to Leandra Hawke and not feel like the practice should be banned outright?

She wanted to ask Solas about it but refrained. Blood magic, as she was learning, was incredibly taboo. Best to wait until nobody else was around to hear.

And, honestly, Helen needed more time to figure out how she felt about Solas digging around in her mind.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. She already knew how she felt about the “digging around in her mind,” part. She hated it. It might not be as egregious as what Clinton had done, or what Ivans had tried to do, but it was still a deep breach of her trust. Solas damn lucky she hadn't Thrown him.
halfway across Val Royeaux.

What she needed was more time to figure out how she felt about Solas.

Helen felt like her eyes and her brain were never quite in agreement about him. He pointed his bigotry at everybody, even other elves, yet he never hesitated to help the downtrodden, regardless of who they were. He was an apostate hermit from a "small village to the north," who also had impeccable table manners and deeply informed opinions about the political affairs of nations. She sometimes caught him staring at her with troubled eyes before he smoothed his face into that neutral mask he seemed to take on and off at will.

The mage had wisely kept his distance since leaving Val Royeaux. She did, at least, believe that he would not trespass in her head again. Not if he valued his life, anyway.

Then a minor miracle happened, and she forgot all about Solas for a while.

Her hair came back. She woke up one morning and felt a fine dusting of hair where bare scalp had been the night before.

“Cassandra!” she shook the still-snoring woman. “Cassandra, wake up!”

The Seeker bolted awake. “What? What is it? What is wrong?”

“I need you to look at my head.”

Cassandra blinked at her, then narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“Because I need you to tell me if my hair is really growing back.”

Cassandra protested but allowed Helen to pull them outside, both of them wearing only their form-fitting under-armor that also doubled as sleepwear on the road.

The sun was just beginning to rise. Varric, who'd had last watch, was putting breakfast on the fire. Solas was going through his morning stretches.

“Well?” Helen said as she bent her head down so Cassandra could see her scalp.

Cassandra made an impatient little noise. “Yes, Herald, your hair is growing back. It is also white.”

Helen squealed and hugged her. Solas only seemed mildly interested but a rich smile formed on Varric's face.

“That is, hands down, the girliest thing I've ever seen either of you do,” Varric said. Cassandra rolled her eyes and grumbled as she reentered the tent.

“Don't worry about her,” Varric said as he handed Helen a cup of coffee. “Happy looks good on you.”

Later that day, Cassandra remarked, “Your hair was black when I first saw you.”

Helen nodded. “The white stood out. I colored it black in the hopes of making it harder for Clinton to find me. It did not work but at least it was useful on infiltration and undercover missions.”

Helen's good mood lasted for days. She grinned like an idiot for hours on end. She knew it was vain but didn't care. Although her baldness was technically Clinton's fault, Helen had linked it in
her mind as just one more thing to hate about Thedas. The Herald of Andraste was bald but Helen Trevelyan had hair. Even her nightmares seemed less intense.

It wasn't until Solas approached her one evening that reality came crashing back in.

She had first watch that night. They were at the foot of the Frostbacks and expected to reach Haven within a few days. Cassandra and Varric had gone to bed. Helen set up her watch as Solas walked the perimeter to place his security wards.

She expected him to go to sleep, as he usually did. Instead, he sat down beside her. “My apologies, Herald, but it has been several days since I last checked the mark.”

Reality settled heavily back onto Helen's shoulders. She sighed and held her hand out to Solas.

He clasped it between his hands. “Are you still having nightmares?”

“Yes, but not like before.”

“Does the mark still pain you?” he asked.

Helen nodded, and then felt the warmth she associated with Solas' healing spells flood through her hand as the ache dissipated.

She watched his hands as he worked. His left hand held hers while his right seemed to be doing all of the work. Sometimes he would make movements with his right hand—swipe, pinch, reverse-pinch—that were so much like using a haptic interface that Helen wondered why she had not noticed it before.

After a couple of minutes, he said, “I need to check from the Fade side. I will only stay as long as necessary.”

She reluctantly gave permission.

He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly through his nose. A small noise escaped him, almost like a soft grunt of pain. After a minute, when he opened his eyes again, they were filled with regret.

“It appears that these wards are holding up much better than the last set.”

“Oh,” Helen was surprised at this. He looked so upset, she half expected him to tell her she was about to lose her hand or something. “Is that not good news?”

“Yes, it is good news. I am just....” he gently placed her hand back in her lap and scrubbed his face with his palms before continuing. “You seemed to be feeling more optimistic this past week. It is disorienting to feel the weight of your true emotions.”

Helen was unsure what to say to that. She could not deny how she felt because he would know she was lying. On the other hand, he was part of the cause for her inner turmoil and he knew it. She finally ran a hand over her peach fuzz and said, “It is vain, I suppose, that just having my hair back would make such a difference. But I really did not like being bald.”

“Is there something wrong with being bald, Herald?” Solas asked. His tone was serious but his eyes twinkled.

*Is he...teasing me?* “Not if you're an old man, no,” she gently teased back.
Solas’ lips twitched. Then he studied her features for a moment. “I did not realize that it bothered you so. If you like, I know a spell that could grow your hair out in moments.”

Helen tried to stay calm. “Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“How does it work? Does it use resources from my own body?” She really wanted this but not if it would pull on her already scarce energy stores. They’d had so little combat over the last week that she was finally regaining a bit of the weight she had lost.

“No. The spell only replicates what is already there.”

Helen almost asked where he got the mass for that sort of replication but decided, fuck it! Don’t care!

“Yes, please.” She held her thumb and finger about an inch-and-a-half apart. “Just this much. Any longer and people will find it odd.”

Solas got up onto his knees and had her do the same, facing him. “Close your eyes and hold very still,” he warned.

He placed his hands on her head, starting right at the hairline. A green light emanated from his hands and he slowly ran them over her scalp. It felt like somebody pouring a carbonated drink underneath her skin.

When he was finished, he placed his hands on her shoulders but said nothing.
Helen opened her eyes. Solas was staring at her, his expression tender.

“How do I look?”

He gazed at her for another moment before he finally murmured, “Young.” He slowly sat back on his heels, his hands sliding down her arms until he let go.

Helen moved until she was sitting with her legs crossed and tentatively ran her fingers through her hair.

When she pulled down her bangs, she could see her hair, back to the platinum blue-white color that it had been since she was sixteen. She let out a quiet, surprised laugh. It had been so long since she’d seen this color that her eyes began to water. “Nuvas ema ir’enastela, Solas,” she sniffled. Goddammit. Don’t cry.

“Lasa halani.” He shifted until he was sitting in front of her, mirroring her posture, the knees of their crossed legs almost touching. “What troubles you?” he asked, a worried expression on his face.
She giggled a bit, through her tears. “That is a very long list, Solas. If I get started, we will be up until sunrise.”

“I know,” he quietly acknowledged. “And I am so sorry for causing you pain, my friend.”

“Friend?” Helen looked up at him, unable to hide her surprise. “Is that what I am to you? You mostly treat me like a disobedient child.”

He did not deny it. Instead, he clasped his hands together in his lap and stared at them, as if he were having to choose his words carefully. Finally, he said, “Friendships in the Fade are just as deep and rewarding as they are in the waking world but they are also easier, less complicated.

“People in the waking world are much harder to read, and none more than you. I misjudged you. The fault for that is mine, and mine alone.”

Helen considered him for a moment. “Do you have anybody in the waking world, Solas? Family of any kind?”

He met her gaze with grief-stricken eyes. “No,” he said, “not for many years now.”

She reached over and lightly placed her hands on his. “Ir abelas, Solas.”

“Tel abelas, Helen. I appreciate your kindness.”

They both stared at their clasped hands for a moment, before Helen said, “I should not keep you awake, Solas. It is my watch.”

“I do not mind. I have missed our talks.”

“So have I,” Helen said, surprised to hear herself not only say it but mean it. She had missed talking to him. “Well, since you are here, I do have questions.”

They talked quietly through all of her watch and some of his. According to Solas, blood magic was not inherently evil. However, because it was often used as a last resort by desperate mages, it was associated with evil or morally questionable acts.

Horrors like Orsino’s Harvester were only possible with blood magic because such a construct was based in the flesh, not the Fade. Blood magic lessened one’s connection to the Fade, which is why Solas did not use it himself.

Something else she learned. Blood was the actual fuel for blood magic, which was pretty fucked up, in Helen's opinion. Truly evil mages would sacrifice the unwilling to increase their fuel supply, so to speak.

Lyrium, on the other hand, gave a mage more access to the Fade but was not, in and of itself, a power source. It was also expensive, addictive to some, and too many mages used it as a crutch.

When she finally started yawning too much to ask questions, she stood and brushed off the dirt from her pants. Solas stood as well.

Helen ran her fingers through her new hair. As apologies went, it was pretty good one. “Thank you again, Solas. This was kind of you.”

“It was the least I could do. On nydha, Helen.”

“On nydha, Solas.”
A few days later, when they returned to Haven, Josephine was waiting for Helen in her cabin. The ambassador was standing at Helen's little table and unpacking a small bag of toiletries.

"Josie!" Helen exclaimed, surprised to see her there.

Josie looked up at Helen and clapped. "Herald, welcome back! Oh, it is true! You do have hair!"

Helen laughed. Finally, somebody was as enthusiastic about this as she was. "Yes! I do. Unfortunately, it stinks as bad as the rest of me. So unless you want to watch me bathe, you'd best be gone."

Josephine waved a hand. "If it does not bother you, Herald, it certainly does not bother me. Antivans are not so modest as our southern brethren. And I also brought you some shampoo, a conditioning rinse, some new soap. Oh! This is a product from Antiva which will make your hair more manageable. Here is a comb and a brush..."

Josie talked non-stop while Helen prepared her sponge bath, and got undressed. She didn't bat a single eyelash as Helen stood buck naked by the hearth and unceremoniously dumped a half-pan of water over herself.

The shampoo smelled like lavender and mint. Helen washed her hair twice, then used the rinse that Josie handed her.

"We were told that your hair was white but I did not believe it."

"Told by who?" Helen said.

"One of our scouts spotted you earlier today. They sent a raven letting us know of your arrival. There is already a rumor that the shock of falling through the Breach turned your hair white."

"Sure," Helen said, as she scrubbed her face with a soapy flannel. "Let's go with that."

Josie kept her company as she finished bathing, asking her how she liked Val Royeaux, weren't the fashions in the city just lovely, and what did she think of Madame de Fer's estate?

It was like having a little sister or a gossipy roommate. Helen loved it. She got dressed, then Josie handed her a comb and mirror. Helen took a deep breath and looked.

Solas was right. She did look young. And not young like, "Wow, she looks amazing for her age." She was now sporting a look like, "Hey, who gave that little boy a dagger?"

Josie showed her how to use the hair product which was like hair serum. It didn't do anything to make her hair stick out less but at least it smelled nice.

They headed to the War Room to meet with the other advisors. Everybody agreed that, yes, Lord Seeker Lucius' actions were bizarre. Beyond that, however, none of them could agree on what steps to take next.

Cullen still wanted to chase after the Templars. Leliana and Cassandra thought she should go speak to Fiona. Josie made some rather pointed remarks that the Inquisition still lacked the influence necessary to approach either group successfully and suggested that Helen begin working harder on recruiting agents. Helen told them (politely) to make up their damn minds and ended the meeting.
Then the requests started.

Leliana asked her to track down a Grey Warden named Blackwall in the Hinterlands.

Some apple-cheek merc invited her to the Storm Coast and meet with his boss.

Solas wanted to go back to the Hinterlands for some artifact that he thought would strengthen the Veil.

Plus, bandits had taken over an old keep in the southern Hinterlands and threatened to undo everything Helen and her ground team had accomplished.

And, for good measure, a local Avvar tribe had captured Inquisition soldiers in a place descriptively called the Fallow Mire.

Still no sign of her escape pod. Still no sign of her omnitool.

Helen could only bite back so much impatience. “I know our resources are stretched thin,” she said at yet another meeting in the War Room, “but how can you not find an escape pod? It's the size of this room!”

The advisors all looked at her awkwardly, like she'd said something ignorant.

Cullen finally cleared his throat and said, “Quite honestly, Herald, we aren't certain how you managed to get into the Conclave. You say you landed north of there and snuck in through the back but there are no roads in that direction. The terrain is deadly at the best of times.”

Helen searched her memory. “I never found any roads. Mostly, I just remember a lot of climbing and being very cold. To the extent I remember anything at all.”

“The point is,” Cullen continued, “it isn’t an area that lends itself to exploration. We get snowfall at this altitude year-round.”

Helen sighed and reminded herself that scanners, shuttles, and satellite surveillance did not exist here.

“As for your bracelet,” Leliana said, “it is a small thing, easy to hide.”

“It is not a bracelet,” Helen muttered. They gave that the same sort of credibility as her protestation that her biotics were “not magic.”

At least her Medical Corps was getting something accomplished, despite continuing problems with supplies. The four of them proudly showed off the clean tents, the two laundry kettles, and notes of recent patients. Rose had made them matching white armbands with the symbol of the Templar sword overlaying that of the Magi Circle.

Helen told them all they were doing a remarkable job under difficult circumstances and headed to Leliana's tent to discuss the supply issue.

Leliana was ordering an assassination. Helen interrupted her. “Wait, why are we doing this? Who is this man?”

“A traitor,” Leliana spat. This man, Butler, had not only killed one of her best agents, he also knew the identity and location of other Inquisition agents. A quick assassination would protect both the lives and the identities of her spies.
“Would the Inquisition be better served by his capture and interrogation?”

Leliana almost looked offended. “No, Herald, we would not. Butler is a master of escape. By killing him now, I save the lives of a dozen others.”

“Ah,” said Helen. “Well then, carry on.”

Leliana issued instructions to her scout, who nodded once and left. Then she looked at Helen, not bothering to hide her surprise. “You approve, then?” she asked.

Helen shrugged. "I am in no position to disapprove. The Alliance sent me on scores of missions where the enemy would resist with lethal force. We would respond in kind. The Alliance would never call those missions 'assassinations,' but the end result was the same."

They talked a bit more about supplies. Then Helen checked in with Harrit. Mother Giselle. Threnn.

Vivienne arrived, followed by Sera. Helen made sure they were properly settled in.

After three days in Haven, Helen's head spun with the weight and volume of her duties. Every time she talked to somebody, she was handed another task. She couldn't even find the time to make a list of the things she needed to do.

She ducked into Josephine's office.

“Hide me,” she begged, and then explained about her ever-increasing task list and her inability to get it organized.
“This is not a problem, Herald. Follow me, please.”

Within minutes, Helen was sitting in the War Room, with blank scrolls, quill and ink, a basket of
sandwiches and several bottles of hard cider.

“Nobody should bother you here, Herald.”

“Josie, have I mentioned that you are my favorite? Because it’s true. You are my very favorite person on this whole planet.”

The ambassador smiled. “Thank you. Do let me know if you need anything else.”

Josephine closed the door as she left. Helen dipped the quill into the ink and got to work.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, she gets her hair back!!

Many, many, many thanks, as always, to both of my betas. They are doing their own heaving lifting IRL but still find the time and energy to keep me from going too far off course.

I (all of us, really) have been blessed again to have another beautiful render of Solas and Helen, done by the ridiculously talented ProcrastiKate! Her tumblr is http://anatrocity.tumblr.com/

Thank you to everybody who has left comments and kudos. I am, as ever, completely floored by the love and support you all have for Helen and her journey.

Finally, if anybody wants to find me over on tumblr and ask me Qs, it is here: https://unhealthynpcobsession.tumblr.com/
Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine held an operations meetings a few hours after the Herald left for Val Royeaux. After going over new staffing, supply lines, and other various issues, Cullen remembered something that had been nagging at him.

“The Herald said that guardsmen were openly plotting to kill her. Is that true?” he asked, his question pointed squarely at Leliana.

The women exchanged worried looks. “What?” Cullen said.

After a very long pause, Leliana said, “Commander, this is the third time we've discussed that topic.”

Cullen felt all the color run from his face. His hands started to shake. “Is it, really?” he said weakly.

They both nodded. Other than Cassandra, only Josephine and Leliana knew he had quit taking lyrium.

“If you'll recall, we three had a discussion right after they had completed their punishment. We discussed it a second time a week or so ago, after Flissa overheard them in the tavern,” Leliana said, not unkindly.

Cullen frantically searched his memory for something that would trigger a response, but there was nothing there about this at all. Nothing.

“Maker,” he whispered. He had to support himself on the War Table to prevent his knees from buckling. “My apologies to you both. I thought I had a better handle on my symptoms.”

Leliana looked sympathetically at him. “Cullen, please do not fret. Neither day was one where I would have described you as well-rested.”

"Or well-fed," Josephine added. "I understand the desire to push yourself as much as possible, but you still need to take care of yourself, Commander.”

“What else have I missed?” he demanded.
“Small details here and there,” Leliana said, “but nothing that has interfered with your ability to train and move troops.”

“And the guardsmen?”

Leliana quickly sketched out the situation for him. They were resentful and tended to drink, but were not plotting anything specific. The danger was not so much that they posed a credible threat, but that they were too stupid to recognize that the Herald could kill them with little more than a gesture.

“The Herald is aware of the situation,” Leliana reassured him. “I have little doubt that she will handle it appropriately, should they be foolish enough to attack her.”

“Does she know that I've stopped taking lyrium?”

Leliana shook her head. “Not that I'm aware.”

“If either of us felt that you were no longer fit for duty, we would have said something. You have our full support, Commander,” Josephine said briskly, then she deftly changed the topic.

He managed to get through the rest of the meeting without embarrassing himself, but concentration was not easy when he kept wondering, **how much of today will I forget?** Meanwhile, every heartbeat pulsed *lyrium-lyrium-lyrium*.

That night, when he knelt by his cot to pray, he asked for the first time, "Maker, am I doing the right thing?"

**

“Did you really create 'Company Half-Wit' in the Hinterlands?”

In hindsight, it wasn't the most professional thing he'd ever written.

Cullen learned about Company Half-Wit from Corporal Vale, who had sent a raven to Commander Rutherford, asking whether Half-Wit had to do *everything* together, as the Herald had decreed, or could he start breaking them up into smaller teams?

His response to Vale (“What in the Maker's name is Company Half-Wit?”) was sent via raven in the morning. By late afternoon, he received Corporal Vale's gleefully colorful description of how the Herald had formed the six-man unit.

Cullen had stormed into Leliana's tent and thrust Vale's letter into her hands. "Did you know the Herald formed Company Half-Wit?" he demanded.

“Of course, I did.”

“And you didn't tell me?”

“I assumed you already knew.”

He lowered his voice for a moment and checked to make sure they were alone. ‘Is this one of those 'small details' that I was told about and simply forgot?’”

“I don't think so,” she said.

*Good.* He could go back to being angry with the Herald. Cullen worked himself up into a lather as
Leliana read the letter, laughing out loud at a couple of places.

“Is it funny!” he snapped.

“Beg to differ,” she said brightly, as she handed the letter back to him. “Good luck, Commander!”

Cullen scrawled off his one-sentence note to the Herald and sent it to the Inquisition's safe-house Val Royeaux. It would be waiting for her when she arrived.

By nightfall, he had calmed down somewhat and re-read Vale's letter.

According to Vale, the Herald had ordered Half-Wit to do “everything” together, beginning with digging pit latrines. Tempers ran very high for a few days. Arguing led to such shoddy work that the first two pits had to be abandoned halfway through.

When the rest of the camp started calling them, “Company Half-Pit,” the unit finally buckled down and finished the job properly.

Their Corporal then sent them to other Inquisition camps, ostensibly to dig more pit latrines per the Herald's orders. Cullen thought it far more likely that their Corporal just wanted them gone.

Between campsites, Half-Wit had to fend off bandits, bears, and wolves. The local citizenry asked for help with various small problems, viewing the six of them as a single unit of the Inquisition, not a random collection of hotheads. A handful of local maidens claimed to have eagerly given their virginities (“or what was left of it,” Vale opined) to the better-looking soldiers in Half-Wit.

By the time they had made it to every secured Inquisition camp in the Hinterlands, Company Half-Wit was a tightly-knit unit. Their camaraderie was contagious, Vale said, inspiring others to work together for the Inquisition.

Now, however, the Inquisition had all the pit latrines it needed. Vale wanted to break the unit up into teams of two or three to more efficiently scout the surrounding area.

Cullen recognized that he and the Herald used similar techniques on their men (although Cullen told himself that he would never have done something as demeaning as labeling his men “half-wits.”)

In the morning, Cullen scratched out his answer—it was all right for Vale to break Half-Wit up into smaller mission teams but keep the unit together as a whole. Cullen closed the letter with, "Feel free to change their name."

Several hours later, he received Vale's response. “Not a chance, Ser. They'd never forgive me.”

**

The advisors met in the War Room to go over the Herald's report from Val Royeaux. Her short but disturbing account of what had happened in the market square had all three advisors alarmed.

Cullen sympathized with the Templars' frustration. The Chantry had long taken Templars for granted. Mother Hevara's assumption that the Templars would blindly support her grandstanding was precisely a case in point.

But punching the old woman in the head? Abandoning Val Royeaux? It was madness.

The Herald also reported that she had recruited First Enchanter Vivienne and an elf archer who
claimed to be a Red Jenny.

“Strange days we live in, bringing such different people into the cause,” Cullen mused. “Still, I suppose it is a good thing that the Herald convinced them to join.”

Leliana snorted. "I can't speak for the Red Jennies, but I promise you, Madame de Fer needed no convincing. Some 'arcane advisor' has all but replaced her at Empress Celene's court. She's here because she is seeking another sphere of influence."

“Still, her interest means the Inquisition's influence is on the rise,” Josephine pointed out.

They moved on to other topics. The newly formed Medical Corps was up and running, and nobody had yet died or been possessed. Haven's population was increasing on a daily basis with recruits. The three advisors divided the new people up by talent, discussed temporary housing and the need for a larger food supply.

After the meeting was over, Cullen read his personal correspondence. He had written to Cassandra to let her know about the gaps in his memory.

Cullen,

Why do you think I am always after you to eat something? Not getting enough food and rest will affect anybody's memory, no matter the circumstances. I do have faith in your ability to overcome this but not if you're an idiot about it. If you are truly worried about forgetting things, keep a journal—like I have also suggested.

You should listen to me more,

C. Pentaghast.

Cullen smiled. He had to admit, just reading Cassandra's bossy words made him feel a bit better, and he placed her letter into his small collection of important personal papers. If a Seeker of Truth had faith that he could do this and had said so in writing, he was not so foolish as to throw such words away.

Herald,

Did you really create 'Company Half-Wit' in the Hinterlands?

C. Rutherford, Commander, Inquisition Forces

Written underneath it was a single word. “Yes.”

Cullen sighed and rubbed his eyes. Right. Well, ask a stupid question, eh, Rutherford? He started to place the Herald's letter in the trash. At the last moment, he put it on top of Cassandra's letter.

**

He had not recognized the Herald at first when she'd returned to Haven. The mop of short, white hair gave her the appearance of a teenage elven boy. Indeed, his first thought was that the person standing next to Ambassador Montilyet reminded him a great deal of Fenris.

Then he overheard her talking. Fluent as she had become, there was still no disguising either her strange accent or the gravelly timbre of her voice. It had a way of cutting through sound, even when she wasn't speaking loudly.
He heard quite a lot of that voice over the next couple of days, as the Herald expressed frustration with the advisors for being unable to decide what to do next.

She also did not seem to fully appreciate why her stupid ship and bracelet were not at the top of everybody's priority list.

Late one night, he headed to the War Room to retrieve the reports he'd left there by accident earlier in the day. Ordinarily, that would not bother him, but ever since he'd learned that there were blank spots in his memory, every little thing seemed portentous. Was this lyrium madness or just the usual reaction to a stressful job?

He also had a blinding headache, and he knew—he knew—that a single dose of lyrium would melt it away. Is this suffering truly worth it? The question was now on his mind all the time.

He opened the door to War Room, only to find the Herald, her back to the door, sitting alone at the table.

"Herald! Forgive me; I did not mean to intru—"

"Shhhh!" She jumped up, and yanked him in the room by his arm, quickly closing the door behind him.

Cullen looked down at her like she'd gone mad. "I beg your pardon!"

The Herald looked up at him apologetically. "I am so sorry, Commander, I should not have grabbed you like that. I am just hiding from everybody until I can get my work finished."

Cullen looked at the War Table. A basket of sandwiches and several bottles of cider covered up most of Orlais. Scrolls, lists, and place markers were scattered across Ferelden. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to figure out how to be in several places at once," she sighed, sitting back down in the chair she had occupied.

"I see. Well. I'll get my reports and leave you to your work," Cullen said. He walked around the table top the bookshelves and started fishing through the stacks of papers.

The Herald was comparing the map on the War Table to it to a list written in a language he did not recognize. "Do you happen to know if there are ferries that cross Lake Calenhad?" she asked him.

"Why do you want to cross Lake Calenhad?" Where in the Maker's name were his damn reports?

"I'm not certain I do. I am just trying to find a faster way from the Storm Coast to the Hinterlands than the Imperial Highway."

He put down one stack and picked up another. "There are ferries that can take you around Lake Calenhad, but not many are capable of carrying mounts. Check with Harding, though. She might be able to make arrangements to have mounts waiting for you at port."

Ah, there were his reports. He turned around to leave. The Herald leaned over Orlais and grabbed the basket of sandwiches and a bottle of cider. She held them out to him and said, "I'll share my supper if you will answer my questions about places I am going."

He hesitated. All he wanted was to go to his tent, finish his reports and lie in the dark for several hours. Maybe even sleep.
“Please, Commander,” she said quietly. “I do not want to make the wrong decision because I lack the information everybody else takes for granted.”

Cullen wasn’t sure what shamed him more—the fact that she felt the need to beg her advisor for advice, or the fact that he still desperately wanted to tell her no.

“You don’t have to give me your own food, Herald. I'll answer your questions.” His tone came out a little harsher than he intended.

She studied him for a moment, then handed him the cider. “Drink this, at least. You look dehydrated.”

Cullen sighed impatiently but put down his reports and took the cider. He pulled the cork and took a long swallow. Then he stood next to the Herald and looked down at the map.

“What are you trying to accomplish, exactly?” he said, gesturing towards her lists and scrolls.

It took her several minutes to explain everything she needed to do. She needed to go to the Fallow Mire and rescue Inquisition soldiers. She needed to go to Redcliffe and meet with Fiona and the rebel mages. Leliana wanted her to locate a Grey Warden in the Hinterlands. The Iron Bull's Chargers wanted a meeting on the Storm Coast. And she had over a dozen, smaller errands for the Inquisition.

Finally, she got to the end of her list, saying, "Plus, I need to find more people for the ground team besides just Sera and Vivienne. Varric, Solas, and Cassandra have been going non-stop with me since the beginning. It is not fair to them."

He had not realized they had thrown quite so much into her lap. He stared at the map and mentally ran through all of the various paths she could take.

“Top priority?” he asked.

“The Fallow Mire. I do not like the idea of our soldiers being held captive.”

“Lowest priority?”

“Meeting with Fiona. She had the time to travel from Redcliffe to Val Royeaux, just to set up a meeting back in Redcliffe? She must not be in any rush.”

He studied the map. "Crossing Lake Calenhad by ferry would probably save you a couple of days," he said, "but if I may, I would suggest you travel the roads. We have reports of rift activity all over the Imperial Highway, and you are the only one who can close them."

She nodded and scribbled something down on a piece of paper. He took another pull from his cider, only to find it empty. The Herald slid another cider towards him. Before he could thank her, she said. “What should I expect on the Storm Coast?”


She helped herself to a sandwich. “I thought darkspawn were only active during a Blight.”

Somehow, the basket of sandwiches wound up in front of him. He took one.

“Darkspawn never really go away,” he said, around a mouthful of mutton-on-rye. “Between Blights, they retreat underground to recover, until they can find another Archdemon to corrupt.
Even so, small numbers wander to the surface every now and again, especially near Dwarven ruins."

"Why there?"

"The darkspawn destroyed the Dwarven Empire ages ago," he explained. "Now they inhabit the old Thaigs."

She scribbled down something else. "Thedas certainly has no shortage of horrible things," she said shaking her head. "I have fought many enemies in my time, but most of them were just other people."

Cullen walked over the bookshelves and perused the titles there. He pulled An Anatomie of Various Terrible Beasts by Baron Havard-Pierre d'Amortisan and Tales from Beneath the Earth by Brother Genitivi. "Read these to start," he said. "D'Amortisan was a bit fanciful in his descriptions but not inaccurate."

"Thank you." She looked at the books for a moment, then put them down next to her lists.

Cullen looked at the map again. "The Fallow Mire is mostly bog. The terrain alone is going to make that an exhausting mission. You'll want fresh legs for it. If it were me, I'd wait until I'd recruited more people. I appreciate the concern for the soldiers, but if the Avaar truly wanted them dead, they'd be dead already. You're the one they want. Be strong when you meet them."

Cullen drank some cider and wiped his mouth. "Maker, I just remembered. Corporal Vale sent word about Company Half-Wit."

"And...what have you heard?" she asked cautiously.

He opened his mouth to berate her—and realized that he wasn't angry about it anymore. At all. So what he said instead was, "That the Inquisition digs the finest pit latrines in all of Thedas."

She laughed, just for a second, and grinned at him. Cullen updated her on Company Half-Wit, relating what Corporal Vale had told him, including the parts about seducing local maidens.


"Truly, the Inquisition is a gift to all of Thedas," he chuckled. It felt odd smiling like that, with his whole face. It was like he was out of practice or something.

He cleared his throat and moved back to more professional topics. "The Chargers have a good reputation. If you recruit them, it should fill out your ground team quite nicely."

"Do they?" she asked. "All right, I will keep an open mind."

They continued to discuss where she needed to go and what she needed to do. In the end, the Herald had a tentative but workable plan. Go to the Storm Coast to speak with the Chargers. Travel to the Hinterlands to locate Warden Blackwall, stopping in Haven along the way if needed. Then head south to the Fallow Mire and rescue the Inquisition soldiers. Finally, she would backtrack to Redcliffe and meet with Fiona and the rebel mages.

"How long do you think this will take?" she asked him.

"Couple of months, I'd guess," he said. "Even if you skip all of these smaller errands, rift activity is going to slow you down."
“Two months,” she said, almost to herself.

It occurred to Cullen that the one person on her ground team who would not be getting any rest was herself. He picked up another sandwich. “Let me ask you something. You once called yourself a 'conscript.' Is that how you truly feel?”

“'Conscript' is probably not the right word anymore. 'Victim of circumstance,' perhaps.” The Herald looked down at her left hand. The mark was faintly visible. “Commander, if I had closed the Breach right away, what would have happened to me?”

“The Chantry would have tried to drag you to Val Royeaux for a trial,” he said.

“Will they try once the Breach is finally closed?”

He thought about it as he chewed, then swallowed and said, “Maybe not. You've cleared the Crossroads, closed a lot of rifts, helped people. The Inquisition is gaining influence. It's much easier to arrest some foreign mage than it is the Herald of Andraste.” He took a huge bite of sandwich.

“I am not a mage.”

Cullen stopped chewing and just looked at her flatly.
She gave an exhausted sigh. “Yes. I know. To most of you, it is a distinction without a difference. To me, it is an absolute fact. I am not a mage. I am not the Herald of Andraste. My omnitool is not a bracelet. The more I speak my truths, the less your people believe me.”

Cullen reached for another sandwich, but the basket was empty. "Right, the ship that doesn't sail and the bracelet that isn't jewelry," he said. "Why are they so important to you?"

"The ship isn't, not really, except for two things. One, the engine core is leaking and probably poisoning the groundwater. Two, it proves I am telling the truth about my origins. Leliana still does not believe me. Neither does Vivienne. If my own team thinks I am mad, or a liar, it makes what I am doing much harder than it already is.

"As for the omnitool, I suppose I could explain all the useful things it does, but since nobody believes it's anything more than a bracelet, I don't know why it matters."

She chewed her lip and stared at the War Table for a long time. “In truth, I don't give a damn how helpful it would be for the Inquisition. I want it back because it has my parents’ voices on it, telling me they love me.”

Maker. “Herald, I didn't mean--”

She raised a hand to stop him. “No apologies, Commander. It is not your fault. My parents died long before I came to Thedas. Anyway, I should not keep you any longer. Thank you for talking to me. I appreciate the help.”

It was a polite opening for him to leave. He took it before he could put his foot in it again. "Of course, Herald. Let me know if you require anything further."

He picked up his reports and left.

Later, when he was in his tent and had finished his work, he stared at the candle on his desk and thought about the last few days.

Cassandra, Leliana, and Josephine had been after him for weeks to take better care of himself. Sometimes he listened but usually not. He'd been ignoring bossy older sister-types since birth.

The Herald did not act like a bossy older sister, nor was she his friend. Yet she had managed to get more food and drink into him in the last few hours than he'd eaten in the last week. His headache was gone. He had willingly cooperated with her mission planning, giving her information that he thought she would find useful. He'd even lost his anger about Company Half-Wit.

Cullen looked through his stacks of papers and books until he found a blank journal. He wrote the date at the top of the first page. He listed a brief description of his day. He included what he'd eaten, who he'd spoken with, and made a list of things he needed to remember (including the guardsmen who were holding a grudge against the Herald.)
The last two entries on the list read as follows:

“Herald's ship. Poison leak.”

“Herald's bracelet. Parents' voices.”

He did not know what to think about a world like the Herald's, where something like a ship could be so quickly discarded. Even if she could not use it to return to her people, it was a ship, for Maker's sake!

But the bracelet?

If he'd owned something that had the voices of his late parents on it, he'd want it back, too.

Cullen got some sleep that night. He woke up with the usual lyrium cravings and a mild headache but some of the bone-draining fatigue of the last several weeks had lifted. He forced down his breakfast, even though he wasn't hungry.

It was early morning when the Herald and her ground team of Cassandra, Sera, and Vivienne left Haven. Just before they departed, Cassandra walked over to him. “You will write to me,” she said. It was not a request.

“I will,” he promised.

“Good. Be well, Cullen.”

“And you, Seeker.”

Minutes later, as the Herald's ground team left on horseback, she caught his eye and gave him one of her own, fingertips-to-eyebrow salute. “Good luck, Commander,” she said.

He saluted back. “Safe travels, Herald.” Then he turned his attention back to his troops.

Chapter End Notes

My betas deserve a tremendous amount of my gratitude and thanks for their help and insight into this chapter. The longer Helen stays on Thedas, the more opportunities I get to screw up the lore or stray too far with characterization. Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen keep me on the straight and narrow, so to speak. (I've said it before, I'll say it again--if both betas agree that something needs to be changed, change it.) If there are mistakes regarding lore (or anything else) the mistakes are 100% mine.

And we have another shamelessly gorgeous "Shirtless Cullen" render by ProstiKate! She devotes so much of her time and energy to illustrating "Half-Life," and I think the story is so much deeper for her contributions. I wish I had a tenth of her skill. She tumblrs over at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/.

Finally, as always, beautiful readers, thank you so much for your continued support of Helen and her journey.
The morning she left for the Storm Coast, Helen dreamed she was back at the Initiative medical facility where she'd had surgery to replace the L3 implant with the new L5.

In her dream, the surgeons had instead surgically inserted a green, glass dagger through the palm of her left hand, then sent her back to work at her old office in Vancouver. She kept knocking her hand into everything from elevator doors to countertops. She became very frustrated that she could no longer use her hand normally. Although nothing in the dream had been especially frightening, the pain was so intense it woke her up.

Her left hand was throbbing and hot to the touch. When Telina arrived with breakfast, Helen reluctantly asked the girl to wake Solas and bring him to her.

He knocked on the Herald's door a few minutes later. She answered it, looking apologetic. "Solas, I am so sorry for disturbing you."

"It is no trouble. I understand your hand is bothering you?" he asked as he stepped inside. She nodded, and they sat at her small table.

Solas took her left hand in both of his. After a moment, he said, "The mark is fine. The wards are keeping it contained. The tissues and nerve endings in your hand, however, are inflamed." He sent a healing spell into her hand. Helen placed her right arm on the table and rested her head on it in relief.

"The pain must have been great for you to send for me. It is not like you to seek help," he said quietly. "Did something trigger this?"

"I am not sure. I had a very odd dream, but I do not know if the dream caused the pain or the other way around."

"Tell me about your dream." He turned her palm over and sent a healing spell through the back of her hand. Helen talked as she watched him work. He asked her she meant by "implant," so she explained that too.

"Your people cut you open and placed a foreign object in your brain when you were a child." His tone of voice made it clear he did not approve.

"They did not cut me open, exactly. They used endoscopy," she used the English term, as it simply did not translate into Common. "Thin, flexible instruments that they ran through my sinus cavities."
“And your parents allowed this?”

She glanced up at him. “Of course they did. It was the safest thing to do. The implant gives a biotic much greater control over their abilities.”

Solas had a deep frown on his face. “Can the implant be used to control you?”

“No.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because I spent several years in research and development of biotic implants. It was one of the reasons I was willing to risk another surgery for the new L5 when I joined the Initiative. I know exactly what is in that implant, Solas. Some of it is my own work.”

Solas looked thoughtful. "I suppose when I envision you in your world, it has always been as you are here, fighting to protect others. I forget that you were also a scholar."

She wondered if he was sending additional healing into her as even her minor aches and pains began to dissipate.

She found herself tempted to drift back to sleep. To stay awake, she discussed her immediate plans. Sera, Vivienne, and Cassandra would accompany her to the Storm Coast. Next, she would go to the Hinterlands to locate a Grey Warden. Then she needed to lead a mission in the Fallow Mire to rescue Inquisition soldiers who had been captured by the Avvar. Finally, she would backtrack through Redcliffe to meet with the mages.

“Could you meet me in the Hinterlands? We can look for your artifact while we are there. I would also like to have you with me in the Fallow Mire.”

“I am at your disposal for ground missions, Helen. Place me wherever you see fit.” He gently let go of her hand. “There. You are healed. You will send for me immediately if it becomes this painful again,” he ordered.

“I will give my ground team the rest they need and deserve, Solas.”

“And what of the rest you need and deserve?” he asked.

"I get none of it in Haven, this close to the Breach. Unless the pain gets so bad that I cannot fight, I will send for you once we leave for the Hinterlands and not a moment before."

“Fel'sounathe da'len,” he said, just below his breath. Stubborn child.

She grinned. “Did you just insult me?”

“Yes. I called you a stubborn child.”

She sat up, yawned, and luxuriously stretched her hands over her head. She opened her eyes to find Solas' gaze tracing the line of her torso, breasts, and up along her throat. His eyes widened just slightly when he noticed that she was watching him watch her.

Helen wasn't completely blind. She recognized when somebody was admiring her body, rare as it had been in her life. But Solas?

Keeping her voice neutral, she said, “Thank you for healing me, Solas. I will write when we are leaving the Storm Coast.”
“You are most welcome, although I suggest you write to me before then. Your handwriting could certainly use the practice.” His tone had suddenly become pedantic and formal, almost rude.

Helen tried to hide her disappointment. She'd seen this before, when a member of one race found themselves with an unwanted or unexpected attraction to a member of another race. She just never thought that the first time it affected her directly, it would be from another human.

“All right, Professor,” she sighed, as she picked up her travel pack. “I will write to you.”

“’Hahren,‘” he corrected as they left her cabin. “The word you are looking for is ‘hahren.’ Travel safe, Herald.”

**

The trip out of the Frostbacks was as depressing and grim as before. Being so close to the Breach returned Helen's hand to its usual state of a dull, constant ache.

The carnage around the Temple of Sacred Ashes was unchanged. Cassandra stared ahead stoically. Sera clicked her tongue, shook her head and would occasionally mutter things like, “poor bastard.”

Vivienne looked unflinchingly at every single body they passed. It took Helen a bit before she realized why. Vivienne was looking for faces she recognized.

That evening, as the four of them huddled in the tent on the side of the frigid mountain, Vivienne confronted Helen. "You will explain to me, right now, how you survived that explosion."

Helen stopped fishing through her pack and looked stonily at the mage. "I do not follow orders, First Enchanter. I give them. If you have a question, ask it. But speak to me like that again, and you will pack your things and leave."

Cassandra and Sera watched Vivienne and Helen's mini-standoff.

Vivienne was not the least bit intimidated by Helen. She was, however, apparently weighing her options to see whether a challenge to Helen's authority was worth her trouble. Finally, she said, "My apologies, Herald, I will rephrase. How did you survive the explosion?"

“I have no idea. I do not remember the explosion.”

“Wot?” Sera asked. “None of it?”

“Not of the explosion itself, no. I can tell you what I do remember.” Helen gave them a somewhat truncated version of her own history and of how she had wound up at the Conclave. Cassandra occasionally interjected with her own memories, as well.

By the time Helen finished, all four of them were in their bedrolls. "It is a terribly exciting tale, Herald, but it still does not explain how you survived," Vivienne said as she smoothed her blankets.

Helen shrugged. Telling her story again had left her feeling drained. “I cannot explain what I do not know.”

“I believe you,” Sera said. “Shite's too weird to make up.”

**

As before, everybody cheered up once they had made it out of the Frostbacks and into better
terrain and milder weather.

Helen and her team had traveled this part of the Imperial Highway already, so it was free from rifts and criminals. This gave them some time to talk and get to know one another.

Sera was loud, immature, and fun. She was brutally efficient with her bow, often snagging their dinner in poor light and from very far away. “How the hell did you see that without a scope?” Helen demanded the first time Sera shot a pheasant that Helen would have needed binoculars or a visor to see.

“Er...I dunno, I just did. Elves have better eyes than humans, yeah?”

Sera seemed uninterested in Helen's past. Helen wasn't nobility and was willing to help the downtrodden. That was enough for Sera.

Vivienne did not believe Helen's backstory but did not raise the issue further. She also had a deep knowledge of the politics and powers behind current events. In a single afternoon, Vivienne explained more about the political situation in Ferelden and Orlais to Helen than anyone else had done in the last two months.

Sera and Vivienne loathed each other. They bickered far more often and with considerably more venom than anything Helen had seen between Cassandra and Varric. The more Sera tried to get under Vivienne's skin, the more Vivienne got under hers.

Helen was sorely tempted to order them to shut up, at least for her own sanity, but there was something fascinating about watching Sera's incoherent anger break uselessly against the rocks of Vivienne's disdain. Helen decided to let the women work it out between themselves, at least for now.

In the evenings, Helen read the books on monsters that Cullen had loaned to her. She wondered, not for the first time, how the hell these sorts of creatures could exist. Were some of these species native to Thedas? Had they been genetically designed? Were they Milky Way species that had evolved in response to an alien planet?

Some of them came from the Fade, which raised an interesting question. “Vivienne, do creatures reproduce in the Fade like they do in the physical world? Do they have parents who give birth to them?”

Vivienne blinked twice, as if she was processing a question she could not believe she had heard correctly. Then she said, very deliberately, “No, Herald. Demons do not have parents.”

Helen took the hint. Vivienne felt magic was a subject to be treated with fear, not curiosity.

The person she ought to be asking was Solas. She just...had so many mixed emotions about the man. Every time she felt like she knew where she stood with him, he did something or said something, which shifted the ground underneath her.

Keeping her emotions in check around him was hard. She liked Solas. More than once, she'd wanted to just curl up on his lap and sob until she was all cried out.

But she'd seen his face when he realized he'd been caught ogling. He would never allow it. It stung more than she wanted to admit.

It doesn't matter, she told herself. He had declared his friendship. That alone was probably an enormous step for him. She reminded herself that was not here to cure Solas of his bigotry. She
was here to seal the Breach. *Don't cry. Don't bitch. Don't blame.*

Dear *Hahren* Solas,

We have made it to the Imperial Highway. Vivienne has been discussing politics with me. I think my questions about monarchies took her by surprise.

My questions about the Fade certainly shocked her, so I will not ask her any more of them. I will ask you, instead. Where do new spirits come from? Do spirits court each other and fall in love and have families?

Sera shot a pheasant that must have been at least 400 meters away. I do not know how she could even see it, much less kill it. She says elves have better eyesight than humans. Is that true?

I do not like using a quill and ink. It is too slow.

Sincerely,

Helen

**

Herald,

“*Hahren*” literally translates as “elder,” not “professor.” Therefore, the correct salutation would be either “*Hahren*” or “*Solas*” but not both. In hindsight, I could have explained this more clearly before you left.

What question about monarchies did you ask, that so surprised the First Enchanter?

Spirits do not court one another. Nor do they fall in love, or have families, although sometimes they will reenact the memories of such events from the waking world. New spirits are "born," if you will, from the Fade itself. Any number of events can trigger such a birth. It might be an abundance of will in that part of the Fade. It might be the press of strong emotion from the physical realm. And it might be simply that the Fade has need of individual spirits at any given time.

I am not surprised that your questions about spirits shocked the First Enchanter. The Chantry in general, and the Circle, in particular, have long taught that spirits lack a soul, that they should never be trusted and are always to be feared. Few Circle mages have ever bothered to ask the questions you have. I am delighted that you have done so and if you ever have more questions, please do not hesitate to ask me.

I am not familiar with a “meter” as a unit of measurement. I will assume for the sake of this discussion that 400 of them is impressive. In the event, Sera is correct. Elves have superior vision to humans and dwarves, particularly at a distance and at night.

The more you practice with a quill and ink, the faster you will become. What are you accustomed to using?

Please write back and let me know if the mark is troubling you.

Safe journeys, my friend,

Solas
It took five days to reach a part of the Imperial Highway that Helen had not traveled before. Unsurprisingly, they frequently encountered both bandits and rifts from that point forward.

It was disconcerting to see somebody as well-dressed as Vivienne throw herself right into the middle of a melee, especially since her barrier was shit. Other than that, she acquitted herself well. She had a preference for cryo effects and a magical weapon called a “spirit blade.” Helen did not quite understand the mechanics of it but gave a standing order that Vivienne was to immediately neutralize rage demons or any other hostiles that used incendiaries.

Sera's greatest talent lay in her ability to kill from distances that would have been impressive in any galaxy. She was fast, accurate and lethal. And while she could throw a punch when necessary, hand-to-hand combat was a risk for her against an enemy who was even lightly armored. Helen made her the team's sniper and ordered her to stay at range whenever possible.

After five days of uninterrupted travel, suddenly skirmishing every few hours seemed to have tired both Vivienne and Sera. Both had gone quiet on that first day of fighting. Helen decided to make camp early to give them a chance to rest.

“So. This not-magic you use,” Sera said after they had eaten supper.

“Biotics,” Helen answered.

“Whatever. Looks a lot like magic to me.” Sera's tone held a hint of accusation in it.

Helen half-expected Vivienne to interject with some exasperated comment about Sera's ignorance but the mage stayed silent.

“The only time I used magic today was when I closed those rifts,” Helen said. “And that is the mark's magic, not mine.”

“Not that. That part was fine. Well, I mean, not fine but, you know, closing it and all, you have to do that, right? But you, with your biotical whatever...” Sera struggled to find the right words.

“I protected myself and my team when we were attacked, just like you did with your arrows.”

“My arrows don't make people float in the air and shit themselves!”

“My biotics don't shoot a man through the eye-slot of his helm. And they all shit themselves, Sera. Yours just waited until they died.”

“That's not—it isn't about—you aren't—UGGGGGGHHH!”
“What Sera is trying and utterly failing to articulate,” Vivienne said, “is that your biotics are quite alarming to witness.”

Cassandra spoke up. “I felt the same way, at first. You will get used to it. The Herald's methods are unorthodox, but she has never failed to protect her own people.”

“Thank you, Cassandra,” Helen said, touched by the Seeker's words.
Vivienne's head was slightly tilted as she looked Helen up and down, almost inspecting her. “How do your people train? Do they have anything like Circles?”

"We once tried something like a Circle, but it was a complete disaster. It was shut down after only a few years. By the time I came into my biotics, training was voluntary. Some did nothing. Others went to Grissom Academy. Most of us joined the Alliance."

“I see. And what is the Alliance?”

Helen explained the Systems Alliance and how it fit into the Milky Way's military and political structure to Vivienne. Sera got bored and went to bed.

Vivienne politely but thoroughly cross-examined Helen about her background. Who were her parents? What country was she from? Any connection to nobility? How old was she when her biotics manifested? Siblings? Spouse? Children? Political connections? Wealth?

Helen answered all of her questions, mildly amused by the woman's ability to ask completely irrelevant questions. Vivienne never once enquired about the other races, the Citadel's government, or anything that would even acknowledge that Helen was from another galaxy.

At the end of it, Cassandra announced that she had first watch. Vivienne stood up and brushed the non-existent dust off her immaculate robes. "I want to thank you, Herald," she said, her tone aloof and polite. "This is the most interesting conversation I have had in many years."

Helen could not tell if she was being sincere or sarcastic, which was probably the point. “You are most welcome, Vivienne.”

**

Dear Solas,

I hope this letter finds you well. We have reached the northern banks of Lake Calenhad. Travel has slowed because we are skirmishing so often. Rift activity and banditry are common here. Is there a connection, do you think?

I do have other questions about the Fade. You once said that the Veil prevents people in the Fade and people in the physical world from understanding each other. Why? Have there ever been attempts at diplomacy between the two realms?

The question I had asked Vivienne was whether her people had ever considered a form of government other than Chantry-supported feudalism. She said they had not.

I prefer to write with a keyboard. It allows me to tap out letters and marks at a significantly faster rate than handwriting.

Sincerely,

Helen

P.S. A question Vivienne asked me reminded me of one I wanted to ask you. How old were you when your magic manifested?

**

Herald,
Your letter arrived yesterday. I am fine, thank you, and I hope you are, as well. It did not escape my notice that you failed to say whether the mark is bothering you. Please let me know how you fare.

Now, on to the questions that you have asked.

Yes, it is very likely that there is a connection between criminal activity and the rifts. Death and strong emotion cause spirits to press up against the Veil. It thins out, in a manner of speaking, making it more likely to tear.

This relates, albeit tangentially, to your questions about the Veil.

The Veil prevents understanding between spirits and the physical realm because the Fade is a place where intention matters far more than form. If one diplomat (to use your term) sees a spirit of wisdom, while his successor sees a pride demon, what would that do to treaty negotiations? Mortals crave a constancy that does not exist in the Fade, and their desire to make it constant could eventually corrupt whatever good they were trying to do.

None of this, of course, addresses the problem of possession. As long as spirits wish to cross the Veil to join the living, there can be no permanent peace. But your questions are insightful, and it is important that you have asked them.

Your queries to the First Enchanter regarding politics raise several interesting points.

First, it is not in the nature of most people to question the systems around them, no matter how unjust those systems might be.

Second, the First Enchanter is incorrect that no other forms of rule have been seriously considered. The Free Marches is a loose collection of city-states. Antiva is a plutocracy. Tevinter is a magocracy, although the constant power struggles limit the ability of the Magisterium to rule effectively.

These are but a few examples. I would argue that all of them are easily abused, and none of them do anything except protect those already in power.

Third, beyond your brief description of your people's military and "the Council," you have not discussed the politics of your world. I am quite curious to know what governance was like in such a place.

I cannot give you an exact age for when my magic manifested. My people did not keep track of such things as Namedays. I must have been very young, as I cannot remember a time in my life without magic. When and where did your biotics manifest?

The technology you describe for writing sounds efficient—almost like a printing press, perhaps—but I prefer the older forms of communication. Handwriting can be as artistic as it is practical. The more you use it, the more it becomes a part of you. I would encourage you to take every opportunity you have to work on such a skill.

Safe journeys, my friend

Solas

**

Helen had no time to admire the natural beauty of the Storm Coast. The Iron Bull and his Chargers
were clashing with thirty or so Tevinter hostiles on the beach. She suspected it was a set-up designed to impress her but nevertheless, she joined the battle. They made quick work of the Tevinters.

Helen talked to the Iron Bull and felt something inside her click into place. For the first time since she’d landed on Thedas, here, finally, was somebody who registered on her mental radar as, “not human.”

Oh, she had little doubt a scan with her omnitool would have shown that his DNA was a derivative of *homo sapiens sapiens*. His basic structure was humanoid, and he was too male to have an Asari-based genetic code.

But whether Qunari had naturally evolved in response to the environment on Thedas or whether they’d been genetically altered, Bull’s massive build, gray skin and that fantastic set of longhorns gave him an “otherness” that she found deeply comforting.

The fact that he was a spy was something she saw as Leliana’s problem, not hers.

The Chargers shared their wine and their stories with the Inquisition scouts that evening, which made them instantly popular. Supper was much livelier than usual.

“So,” Bull said, coming to sit next to her as they were eating, “rumor has it you're from another world.”

“Rumor has it right,” she said.

His one eye stared intently at her. "Mind if I ask you some questions?"

Helen sighed. "No, I do not mind. But I can tell you, having done this several times already, this will go much faster if you would simply list for me what you've heard, and I can confirm or deny."

Bull had mostly accurate information. A military officer from another world. Asleep for thousands of years. Crash landed at the Conclave. The only thing she had to correct for him was that she was not a mage.

She answered questions for about a half-hour. At the end it, Bull seemed satisfied that she was who she said she was, or at least that she was sticking to her story about it.

Helen excused herself, found Vivienne and tapped her on the shoulder and said, “May I borrow you for a moment, please?”

“Of course, Herald.”

Helen led Vivienne to the ocularum that overlooked the beach and explained what it did. “Have you seen anything like this before?”

“I'm sure I haven't. It's revolting magic. I take it your apostate did not know what it was?”

“Solas? No. He said he was unfamiliar with such magic.”

“You could fill many volumes with the magic an apostate is unfamiliar with, my dear.”

“I wouldn't know,” Helen pointed out. “I am not a mage.”

The ocularum, as always, gave Helen a vicious migraine. She hastily marked the map and went
back to camp. Vivienne was no healer, but she did spell both the tent Helen slept in (to muffle sound) and a damp flannel (to stay cold).

Helen drank a healing potion, placed the flannel over her eyes and tried to sleep. It wasn't nearly as effective as Solas' healing spells, but it was way better than nothing.

In the morning, Cassandra and the Chargers left for Haven. Bull stayed behind to help the ground team find Inquisition scouts that had vanished after investigating a merc group that called themselves the Blades of Hessianian.

About an hour later, they found several Blades milling around a group of dilapidated shacks. It took minimal effort to put them all down.

The bodies of the Inquisition soldiers had been stripped of valuables and discarded in one of the abandoned shacks. Bull took all of the bodies outside, where Vivienne and Helen burned them to ash.

Helen found the ocularum shard on the roof of one of the cabins. She climbed down feeling like it had been a relatively productive morning.

Then Bull handed her a note he'd found:

“It’s not our place to disagree. They’re attempting to set themselves up along the shore, and we have orders. We are the sword, not the hand that wields it. You taught me that.

“If they’re worthy, let them come with the Mercy’s Crest. The Blades of Hessianian will listen. You will only get yourself cast out—or worse.”

Helen shook her head. “I do not understand what that means.”

“It means they don't like their leader and want a better one. If you're wearing Mercy's Crest, you can have safe passage into their camp.” He handed her another piece of paper. Mercy's Crest was a pendant. The paper had instructions for how to make one.

They would have to return to the forward camp, make the stupid Mercy's Crest from scratch, and then come back to the area to challenge the leader of the Blades. “This fucking planet,” she muttered in English. “Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

Switching back to Common, she said, “All right, if we're going to be delayed, let's at least go close that rift further up along the beach.”

As they trekked down the far side of the encampment and found a pathway to the beach, Helen realized that what she had believed to be distant thunder was something else entirely—like boulders rolling down a mountain and an angry beast roaring.

“What is that?” she asked her companions. They came out of the foothills and saw a giant.

Fighting a dragon.

“Holy shit,” she breathed.
Helen had seen the klixen Harvesters of Tuchanka. They flew and breathed fire, but otherwise bore little resemblance to the dragons from fairy tales of old. Harvesters were giant, flying bugs. Helen had found them revolting.

_This_ dragon was _glorious_. It's reptilian scales looked like jewels, as they flashed purple and white and orange. When it spat lightning out of its throat, all of the ridges along its neck glowed blue from within.

She did not hear her companions exclamations. She was too focused on the fact that all of the adventure stories her father had read to her as a little girl had just come to life in front of her very eyes.

Helen realized with a fair bit of embarrassment that the mad giggling she kept hearing was her own. She composed herself and moved the team forward to get a better look. After watching the giant and the dragon battle with neither gaining the upper hand, Helen whispered, "Sera. Shoot that giant."

"Uh, Boss?" Bull said.

It was too late. Sera's arrow had flown and, as her arrows tended to do, it hit the giant in the eyeball, which made it very, very angry. It turned its attention to the ground team as the dragon took off and flew away.

The giant picked up a boulder and hurled it in their direction. It fell short, likely because an arrow was affecting its depth perception.

Helen threw a barrier over everybody, except for Bull, who had pulled out his maul and charged the giant, screaming something in Qunlat that her UT translated into, "I HAVE A HUGE, FUCKING HARD ON!"

She sprinted after Bull, getting him under a barrier just as the giant swiped at them both, knocking Bull down and only barely missing Helen.

The giant smelled like someone with a hangover had thrown up on a pair of dirty socks. It noticed her and picked up another boulder as Helen desperately backpedaled away. Depth perception hardly mattered if she was right in front of it. When the giant had fully raised the boulder over its head, Helen slammed a Throw into it.

The boulder sailed into the ocean. The giant looked around to see where its rock had gone. Bull stormed up on the giant's blind side and slammed his maul into its foot. The giant grabbed its toes and hopped on one foot, roaring in anger and pain.

"BULL!" Helen bellowed. "MOVE!"

As soon as Bull was out of the way, Helen unfurled a Shockwave. It tore up the beach and knocked the giant flat on its ass. It rolled over onto its hands and knees.

Bull jumped onto its back, hollering, “_FUCK, YEAH, ASSHOLE!_” He smashed his maul into the giant's skull. One more blow and the giant was dead.

Bull stood triumphantly on top of the giant's back and yelled more Qunlat war cries, all of which were variations on, "SEE MY ENORMOUS BONER!" Sera came running up to celebrate with Bull.
After catching her breath, Helen walked back down the beach towards Vivienne, who was as unruffled as ever.

“I've seen you execute better battle plans, my dear.”

Helen laughed, a wave of relief and mild embarrassment rushing over her. “True.”

They both looked back at Bull, who was cutting off one of the giant's tusks for a trophy as Sera squealed in delighted disgust.

“Well,” Vivienne sighed, “at least the children are happy.”

Chapter End Notes

My betas were, as always, an enormous help on this chapter. This chapter was long and could have been a complete mess. They both kept me from drifting too far afield. I cannot thank them enough.

Likewise, ProcrastiKate's beautiful render of Helen, Vivienne, Cassandra, and Sera in camp is a gift to the story, as all of her renders are. http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/

Thank you, all of you, for reading, reviewing, commenting and the kudos. I am overwhelmed by the support you've all shown for Helen and her journey.

And if anybody received notice that Chapter 24 was up, and then found a broken link, that's my fault. There is a difference between the "preview" button and the "post without preview" button. I hit the wrong one, so...my bad.
Chapter twenty-five

Chapter Summary

Solas twiddles his thumbs in Haven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty-five

With the Herald gone, Solas struggled to find ways to occupy his time.

He continued his search for the orb, mostly through his agents. There was still no hint of its whereabouts.

He also spent a day or two making discreet inquiries about Helen's omnitool. It made sense, he told himself, now that he understood how useful it was. It could make her invisible, which would be an enormous asset during combat. That it would make her happy was entirely beside the point.

His search came up empty, which was unfortunate but not unexpected. Prisoners' possessions went “missing” all the time. Far too often, jailers and guards helped themselves to the belongings of those who had been arrested. That Helen's things had been stolen was not especially unusual.

What was unusual was that nobody was looking. Helen was not some low-level criminal who had little recourse in such matters. She was the figurehead of a growing power in Thedas. If nobody was searching for the belongings of the Herald of Andraste, it meant they weren't missing at all.

And if the advisors weren't looking, that most likely meant Leliana either had it or knew who did.

It was possible, he supposed, that Ambassador Montilyet or Commander Rutherford knew the whereabouts of the omnitool, but Solas found that unlikely. The Ambassador was well-versed in the Game but was neither devious nor cruel. She was also genuinely fond of the Herald and had no reason to hold something back like this. As for Rutherford, the man was an open book. He had no talent for deception at all.

That left Leliana.

Solas’ desire to get the omnitool back for Helen was not so strong that he was willing to make himself the focus of the spymaster's gaze. Leliana's acceptance of his cover story had depended as much on circumstance as it had on his ability to hide in plain sight. Her attention was focused on targets all over Thedas. It needed to stay there. Solas shelved the issue for the moment.

He wondered if Helen would write to him.

“Fel'souanthe da'len,” he had called her, as she'd sat before him. Stubborn child. And a child is exactly what she'd looked like, with her short hair, her petite frame and her head laying on one arm. He'd had a mad urge to pick her up, tuck her into bed and tell her stories until she fell asleep.

Then she'd drowsily sat up and stretched that lithe, little body of her hers, her breasts pressing
against her tunic. Something stirred in him that he had not felt in many ages. Carrying her to bed took on an entirely different meaning.

When his gaze met hers, he knew that he'd been caught ogling. He'd covered up his embarrassment by hiding behind a role Helen was already familiar with—the chronically disappointed teacher.

He did not want to return to that role, in truth. His declaration of friendship to Helen had been sincere. His gift of regrowing her hair had been only for her happiness, nothing more.

But finding a human physically attractive was just unacceptable. It was a step too far. He could not allow it.

The irony was not lost on him. In his youth, he had quite gleefully seduced people he had utterly despised. He had done so as a means to get information, to distract them while his allies moved, or sometimes just for political leverage.

Helen was young, inexperienced, and desperately lonely. Solas had little doubt that, were he to press the issue, he'd have her on her back in no time. He could be the elven lover of the Herald of Andraste, giving him access and influence. A young Fen’ Harel might have once done just that, even if it had meant swallowing his disgust that she was not Elvhen.

But Solas was no longer that man, and Helen was not some social climber playing the Game for selfish ends. His momentary attraction to her was born from his many years of isolation, nothing more. It would pass.

He received his first letter from her a few days later. He wrote back, keeping his tone suitably pedantic and asking her questions that would require her to write long letters. His criticism of her penmanship had mostly been to divert attention away from himself, but the fact remained, her handwriting was atrocious.

Then he twiddled his thumbs for days. There was little to do in Haven.

He chatted with Varric every morning, listening to the author's lies, tales, and business dealings.

He exercised Mor'Lanun, taking the horse out into the glen around Haven.

He stopped by the infirmary to see how Helen's Medical Corps was faring. They had not yet had much to do beyond minor injuries—burns from kitchen workers, sprains from soldiers training too enthusiastically, and a broken jaw from a fight in the tavern.

Neither mage had any natural talent for healing magic, but the older one, Rose, was quite knowledgeable about anatomy. Young Owin was industrious and creative. He told Solas some of his ideas for field surgery. A couple of them, such as using fire magic to cauterize internal bleeding or sleep spells for painful procedures, had potential. Solas gave encouragement and advice.

If nothing else, the infirmary was clean. Few others in Haven had heeded Helen's push for improved sanitation. Flissa, apparently, was preaching it with the verve of the newly converted. Commander Rutherford was also on board, bellowing orders at his charges to wash their hands after using the privy.

Most people, however, ignored the new washing stations and carried on as they always had.

At least once a day, Solas would wander through Adan's lab and ask obtuse questions, just to see how long it took before the words, "Maker's balls, mage, leave me be!" erupted from the alchemist's mouth. His goal achieved, Solas would lazily take his leave.
He still had far too much time on his hands.

One night, he entered the Fade and found a very annoyed Desire demon waiting for him.

“You are an incredibly rude person,” it pouted, as it ran its fingertips underneath the curve of its left breast. “Do you know how long it took for me to find my way back after you banished me?”

“Not long enough, it seems. Please go away.”

“Why? Aren't you glad to see me?” It walked towards him, swaying its ample hips in an exaggerated fashion.

He sighed impatiently. “I have work to do. Leave me in peace before I banish you again.”

Desire scoffed. “Oh, please. What work? You are bored out of your skull here in this little town of mortals.”

“And you have nothing to offer that I would find either useful or diverting.”

"Are you sure about that?” The demon held out a hand, and an image of Solas' orb floated above it.

Solas rolled his eyes. “Young one, if you truly knew where that was or understood what it represents, the last thing you would do is tease me with it.”

"How about now?” Desire turned itself into Helen, looking drowsy and content, holding the orb casually on her hip. "I know you like her,” it said. “I don't blame you. I like her, too, but she doesn't talk to me. She talks to you, though. Thinks you're her friend.”

He began to lose patience. “You are wasting your time. More importantly, you are wasting mine. Now leave me be.”

Desire vanished the orb but gave Helen perky, pointed ears that stuck out charmingly from her short, white hair.

Solas stared harder and longer than he should have.

Desire-Helen-elf pressed itself up against Solas' chest, looking up at him with Helen's large, dark eyes. “Please, Hahren. Teach me everything you know,” it purred, using Helen's raspy voice.

He placed his hands on its hips and pressed into it, allowing just a moment of pleasure to spike through his groin. “I will admit, I have seen worse efforts,” Solas said, giving it a seductive smile. Desire-Helen-elf licked its lips in anticipation. “But my purpose is not so easily corrupted as others you encounter.”

He bent his head down, placed his lips right next to its perfect little ear and angrily whispered, “Never play with her face ever again.” And using all of his will, he pushed Desire away, banishing it once more.

He opened his eyes, now wide awake. The first full erection he'd had since waking from uthenera pressed against his belly, demanding his attention.

_Fenedhis lasa._ He was not going to allow Desire manipulate him into something as inappropriate
as lust for Helen.

He tried to meditate. He tried ancient breathing exercises. He tried solving complicated harmonic equations in his head. Nothing worked.

Sighing in defeat, Solas took himself in hand. Determined not to think of Helen as he satisfied his physical needs, Solas trawled his memory for previous lovers and exhilarating trysts. Arlathan's most beautiful and seductive paraded before his mind's eye as he worked and worked.

He could not find relief. In desperation, he even allowed himself to think of Desire-Helen-elf, telling himself that it was not really Helen, and so did not count. Yet even that brought him only frustration.

Solas, angrily throwing the covers off of his bed, stood up and did something he had not had to do for thousands of years. He coated his naked body in a thin layer of ice from the chest down.

His blood vessels constricted all at once, forcing blood flow away from his extremities and into his internal organs. It was crude but effective. His body was finally under control.

Filled with self-loathing, Solas magicked the ice away and got dressed. He glared at the walls of his cabin until the sun rose.

Helen’s second letter arrived later that day. It caused him both delight and remorse in equal measure. Delight, for her marvelous questions about the Fade, about politics, and about his own magic. Remorse, because his inappropriate attraction towards her had sullied even his platonic role of teacher.

He spent almost a full day responding to her letter, starting over several times. He made certain that his tone was pompous, his answers supercilious.

Then he went outside and forced himself to look at the Breach.
He needed to remind himself of who they were. Helen was mortal and human and innocent.

He was Fen' Harel and forever guilty. That would never change.

**

Owin, the young mage, knocked on his door one evening.

“Master Solas, I apologize. I know it’s late, but,” he fidgeted, wringing his hands, “there’s a patient. In the infirmary. I don't know what to do.”

“Lead the way,” Solas said. As they walked, Solas asked what the symptoms were.

“Easier to just show you, Ser.”

They ducked into the healer's tent. One of the Templar medics, Ser Bennet, stood inside. On the cot lay a human woman, perhaps twenty-five years of age.

Solas knelt next to the cot. The patient was unconscious, and her hair was falling out in clumps.

“Explain,” he said.

“She's one of the maids. Name of Cecelia,” Owin said. “She came in a couple of hours ago, complaining of fatigue and nausea. We gave her fluids and checked for fever. She couldn't keep anything down. Ser Bennet,” he indicated the Templar standing at the door, “asked her if she could be pregnant.”

Bennet nodded. “She had a Templar lover a few months back. We would see her come and go from the barracks.”

“But she wouldn't let me check,” Owin continued. “She kept saying she just had a bug or something. Then her hair started falling out. Now she won't wake up. I came and found you.”

Solas ran a quick detection spell over Cecelia. “She is with child, about four or five months along, I would say but...”

He allowed his magic to course through her bloodstream and...

He swore quietly. Cecelia also had eezo poisoning, although it was not nearly as strong as Helen's case when he had treated her.

Solas quickly cast a silencing spell inside the tent, then looked over at Bennet. "Who was this young woman's Templar lover?"

Bennet hesitated, then said, “It was Ivans, Messere.”

Solas placed his hand over his mouth, thinking furiously. “Who else knows about her illness?” he asked them.

“Just us, as far as I know, Master Solas,” Owin said. “As soon as I noticed she was losing her hair, I came to find you.”

Solas turned to the Templar. “Young man, please go find Commander Rutherford and bring him here right away. Do not speak to anybody else about this matter. If the Commander asks why you need him, tell him that it concerns the Herald and that I will explain more when he arrives.”
“Yes, Ser,” Bennet said, bowing his head once at Solas. Then he departed.

Solas turned back to the patient again and concentrated on the element now poisoning her body. Unlike Helen, Cecelia had no nodules in her system that Solas could use to contain the eezo.

Solas also checked Cecelia's wrists to see if she happened to have the omnitool. She did not. Then he checked on the fetus. Surprisingly, it was doing fine.

“What's going on, Master Solas?” Owin whispered.

“I am not at liberty to say.”

Bennet returned to the tent, with the Commander in tow.

Rutherford took in everything at a glance. “Who's she?” he asked, pointing to Cecelia.

Solas answered, “Ivans' lover.”

Cullen made a noise at the back of his throat like he was trying not to spit. “Maker save me. All right, tell me what's going on.”

“We should speak privately, Commander.”

Cullen raised his eyebrows in surprise but did not take offense. Instead, he turned to Bennet and Owin and said, “If the two of you would be so kind as to wait outside, please. Don't let anybody into the tent.”

As soon as they were gone, Solas said. “Firstly, she is pregnant. The timing coincides with her relationship with Ivans. Secondly, she suffers from the same poisoning that the Herald had when she arrived at the Chantry after the Conclave.”

"The Herald said that poison came from her ship. Are you sure it's the same?"

“Quite sure.”

The Commander sighed and thought carefully for a minute. "Can you cure her?"

Solas shrugged. “The Herald's nervous system was equipped to neutralize the poison. Hers is not.”

“And the baby?”

“It survives for now.”

Rutherford folded his arms across his chest and stared at the unconscious patient. “Is it safe to revive her? I'd like to ask her some questions.”

Solas sent a restorative spell into the young woman. She stirred and slowly opened her eyes. She blinked in confusion for a moment, then looked around the tent. She froze when she saw the Commander.

“Cecelia, is it? I'm Commander Rutherford.”

She gave a harsh, cynical laugh. “Yeah. I know who you are. Fuckin' traitor's what you are.”

Cullen kept his face impassive. “I'd avoid using words like traitor, if I were you, given the situation you're in. I take it that's Ivans' baby you're carrying?”
She dropped her head back onto the cot. “I told that little shit not to check.”

“I checked you,” Solas said. “Young Owin maintained your privacy.”

“So? Pregnant ain't no crime.”

Cullen said, “I'm not here because you're pregnant. I'm here because you've been poisoned.”

She looked at Solas pleadingly, tears in her eyes, her hands reaching over her lower belly as if to protect her unborn child. "Poison?"

"Yes," Solas answered. "You have a unique poison in your system. I have only encountered it once, when I treated the Herald after the explosion at the Conclave. The element in your body comes only from her world and nowhere else."

Cecelia tried to hide her panic behind false bravado. “Don't believe you. You're just tryin' to scare me!”

Cullen said, “You should be scared. Your lover tried to kill the Herald. It makes me wonder if you've been part of some plan to kill her from the beginning.”

Cecelia now looked utterly terrified. “I din't know what he was up to, I swear! He said, 'Here, hide these,' so I did! Then he died. I din't know what to do! I done told her that already. She said I could keep the clothes! Just ask her!”

Solas bit his tongue while he waited for Cullen to put all of the pieces together.

"Who is 'she?' Who said you could keep the clothes?" Cullen asked.

“Sister Leliana.”

Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose and said something under his breath that sounded a lot like “Fuck.” After he composed himself, he asked calmly, “Ivans' stole the Herald's things?”

Cecelia nodded.

“And Leliana knew.” Cullen stated it as a fact.

She nodded again, more tears spilling from her eyes. “I gave her everything. She only wanted the bracelet, said I could keep the clothes, I swear!”

Solas asked, “Have you been wearing them?”

She nodded and sniffled. “Like long underwear. Keeps me warm.”

“For how long?” Solas asked.

“Until last week. I'm too fat to wear it now.”

“That explains the poison,” Solas said to Cullen. “It's probably been leaching out of the clothing and into her.”

“Where's the clothing?” Cullen asked.

“My quarters, under my bed.”
“And where are your quarters?”

She told him.

Cullen stormed out of the tent. Owin and Bennet walked back in, looking confused.

Well, Solas had done all he could to set things in motion. He sincerely hoped the Commander had
the fortitude to stand up to Leliana and get Helen's omnitool back. He wondered if Helen would
show it to him if she were to—

“Is the baby all right?” Cecelia's weepy voice interrupted his train of thought.

“Your baby is fine so far,” he told her. “I am more concerned about you.”

Solas told the medics only that Cecelia had a toxin in her system but said nothing for how she had
received it. Cullen had not asked him to be discrete, but the man was hardly a master of intrigue.
He doubted Cecelia would say anything, either, unless she wanted to announce her thievery.

While he worked, tears dripped from Cecelia's eyes. “It's not fair. He said he'd take care of me and
the baby. Then she murdered him.”

“She most certainly did not,” he said coldly. “I was there. The Herald acted in self-defense after
your lover tried to rape her.”

"Don't believe you," she said, but there was no real conviction behind it.

In the end, Solas could do little except strengthen her immune system and hope for the best. He left
instructions with the medics to send for him if she worsened, then went back to his own cabin.

**

He received another letter from Helen the following day.

Dear Solas,

I hope this letter finds you well.

We are leaving for the Hinterlands tomorrow.

The Storm Coast has been very exciting. I met and hired the Iron Bull and his Chargers. We
saw a dragon fighting a giant. We killed the giant. The dragon flew away.

I challenged the leader of a mercenary cult called the Blades of Hessarian. It was a few
dozen people all living in a filthy compound. Not one person there came to their leader's defense. I
do not feel bad about killing him—he had ordered the murder of Inquisition soldiers, so his life
was forfeit—but I do regret the loss of his dogs.

Now, these cultists work for me. They were all Herald-of-Andraste this and Chosen-of-
Andraste that. I quite hated it. "Cult leader" is never something I aspired to be.

Is your question about government back in the Milky Way just a sneaky way of making me
write more? Because honestly, Solas, a complete answer to the political systems of every species in
the entire galaxy would (and did) fill several libraries. I will be happy to discuss this in detail when
I see you but writing it out would take me several lifetimes.

For the record, however, most species had some variation on a parliamentary system that
they used for their own people.

At the galactic level, the Council consisted of a single representative from the four most influential space-faring species—Asari, Turian, Salarian, and Human. Four people made decisions that affected trillions. Needless to say, it bred resentment.

My biotics manifested at home, as I worked on a wind turbine. I was sixteen years old and feeling very resentful toward my mother, who'd demanded that I complete my chores before going out with my friends. I had climbed all the way up to the gear shaft before realizing that the tool I needed was still on the ground. I yelled in frustration, and suddenly it was there in my hand.

It startled me so much that I dropped it. When I tried to consciously Pull it towards me, I nearly brained myself with a socket wrench. Not very graceful at all.

I have a question. How do you and Vivienne step through the Fade? What are the mechanics of it, exactly? Do you focus on a far point and use the Fade to pull yourself there? Does the Fade bend the spacetime around you?

I asked Vivienne, but she was not inclined to tell me, saying that it was, "dangerous even for talented mages." I think I would like to try something similar with my biotics.

Travel safe, my friend. I will see you in the Hinterlands.

Helen

**

Dear Helen,

This is the third time you have failed to inform me about your hand. I am beginning to think that you are doing it deliberately to hide your symptoms from me. I sincerely hope this is not the case, for if it is, it is exceedingly dangerous and I

A knock on the door interrupted Solas' written rant to the Herald. He answered it. Commander Rutherford, who looked exhausted, stood outside his door. “Do you have a moment?”

Solas stepped aside and allowed Cullen inside. As soon as he closed the door, Cullen said, “Can you silence the room, please?”

Solas raised a silencing spell. “All right, Commander, we have privacy.”

“When are you leaving to meet the Herald?”

“In four days.”

“Could you leave now?”

“If necessary.”

Cullen fished into his pocket and handed Solas a thin, rigid bracelet. “It was as Ivans' lover said. Leliana has had it from almost the beginning. She sent it to an arcanist for testing and...well, that's not important right now. What is important is that Dagna sent it back weeks ago. Leliana had been holding onto it in case she needed leverage over the Herald.
“Josephine and I have been arguing with her almost non-stop since last night. Leliana has finally agreed to let you take it to the Hinterlands to give it to the Herald. But Maker save me, I just know that if you wait another four days before leaving, that bracelet will 'go missing' once again.”

Perhaps Rutherford was more perceptive than Solas thought. "I expect you are right, Commander," Solas said. "Are there any messages I should convey to the Herald?"

“Yes. Tell her that I hope she hears her parents' voices again.”

“I will,” Solas said. The Commander nodded once, then left.

Minutes later, Solas quietly rode out of Haven, the omnitool safely tucked into the leather thong that held the wolf's jawbone that hung around his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Dreadlordcherrycake, Duinemerwen, and ProcrastiKate gave me TONS of feedback and debate on this chapter. I am incredibly grateful to all of them for their willingness to listen to me think out loud and to bounce ideas off of them.

And we have another fantastic render, this time of Solas getting Adan's nerves, by ProcrastiKate. (Love the smirk on Solas' face!) She's over at http://annatrocity.tumblr.com/

Thank you to everybody who has left comments, reviews, and kudos. You know how on tumblr people will post pics of their Inkies (or other gaming OCs) and say, "look at my son/daughter?" I didn't understand that until Helen. I am continuously floored by the love and support you have all shown for her. Thank you.
Chapter twenty-six

Chapter Summary

Helen gets her omnitool back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty-six

The last several days on the road had been both exhausting and revealing - exhausting because Helen's left hand ached so deeply that it routinely woke her up; revealing because watching Sera, Vivienne and Bull interact was better than any soap opera vid.

Sera and Vivienne still despised each other. There was at least one super bitchy exchange a day. At best, Sera could bring the mage to a draw, like,

“They'll never really like you, Vivvy.”

“Yes, dear, whatever has your scattered mind conjured now?”

“Those nob in Orlais. They barely like their own kin. And you're a mage.”

“You're failing—a among many—is that you presume I desire approval. Power does not require that I be ‘liked.’”

“Well. Halfway there, then.”

Usually, the round ended with Sera blowing raspberries or tossing off a vulgar insult that only highlighted her inability to crack Vivienne's icy control.

Vivienne's manners were both shield and weapon. Every silky, polished insult was wrapped up in “darlings” and “my dears.”

Sera quite liked Bull, though. They egged each other on and bonded over stories of the hot babs they'd bedded. Sera couldn't hold her liquor at all but that didn't stop her from trying to keep up with Bull.

Bull, for his part, had a barely-contained energy about him that reminded Helen so much of a Krogan that she kept expecting him to refer to his “quads.”

His few attempts at flirting with Vivienne had been painful to witness. Vivienne shot him down hard. Now he followed her around like a puppy and called her, "Ma'am." For all of his issues with magic, he had nothing but respect Vivienne. He even took her word over Helen's that Helen's biotics were not magic.

Bull did not welcome Helen's questions about the Qunari, but she asked them anyway. Their
religion—if it was that, Helen wasn't clear on who they worshiped—sounded more like a stringent social order.

Technology was a much safer topic for Helen to ask questions about. The Qunari were more technologically advanced than most of the other races on Thedas, except for perhaps the dwarves. And unlike the dwarves, the Qunari built ships.

“Do the Qunari have a Navy?” she asked Bull one day.

“No. We have an Army that uses ships.”

“I see. What sorts of ships does your Army use?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Are you joking? Bull, I am a former naval officer. I love ships.”

“Yeah?” His eye glanced at her with interest. “What was your favorite ship?”

“That I've ever seen or that I've ever served on?”

“That you've ever seen.”

“The Destiny Ascension. It was the largest dreadnought in the Asari fleet. It was massive.”

“Wait till you see one of the Qunari dreadnoughts. Those babies can blow through fortress walls!”

Helen did not have the heart to tell him that the Destiny Ascension was so large that it had a crew of 10,000 and had as much firepower as the rest of the Asari fleet combined. Still, she had to ask.

“Bull, in all of your travels, have you ever heard of anybody leaving the planet?”

He'd stared at her in disbelief, then looked to Vivienne. The mage issued a long-suffering sigh. "Just answer the question, darling. Trust me; it's not the strangest one she's asked."

Bull had turned back to Helen, his gaze hard. “No.” She just nodded and let the subject drop.

Helen missed Solas more than she wanted to admit. Whatever hangs up he had about race, he was still the only person she had met on Thedas that did not treat her curiosity as a character defect. She was grateful to see him already at the forward camp when they arrived in the Hinterlands.

Helen introduced Solas to the Iron Bull. The two men sized each other up suspiciously. “So. You're the creepy fade mage.”

“And you are the hulking Qunari spy.”

A dick measuring contest? Already? Yay me.

Helen sighed and turned away. She was too tired to make anybody play nice, and there was still too much work to do. Vivienne headed back to Haven with a handful of scouts and Helen saw them all off safely.

Then she talked to the requisitions officer. Helen was running low on travel rations and had expected to resupply here, but the provisions of nuts and dried fruit had gone missing. Helen wasn't particularly upset about the theft itself. Security was hardly an exact science on Thedas, and these sorts of things were going to happen. But she really couldn't afford to lose any more weight. A scout was sent into the Crossroads to find any honey or dried fruit for sale.
She checked reports. She sent an update to the advisors. She mediated a minor dispute among the soldiers.

After the scout returned from the crossroads with a small amount of honey and nothing else, Helen liberated several cups of oats from the horses' feed bag to use for trail mix. She was going to make it herself but the camp cook, an ancient surface dwarf with zero charm, told her, “I'll flay you alive iffen you come near my cook-fire and don't think I won't.” He took her ingredients from her and shooed her away.

Helen ate her supper (mutton stew) standing up as she listened to yet another report—this time of the new and growing bandit threat in the area.

Finally, just after sundown, she was done. Every report had been read; every question had been answered. She was exhausted. All she wanted to do was wash her face, brush her teeth and go to sleep.

Then Solas walked up to her and said, “Something came up in Haven while you were away. Commander Rutherford asked that I bring it to your attention. We should speak privately.”

Helen looked longingly at the tent where her bedroll awaited her. “Now?”

“It is a matter of some urgency.”

Helen nodded and followed Solas. She expected he would stop not far from camp and tell her whatever it was that needed telling. Instead, he led her down the hill until they reached a little, round shack. He opened the door and held it open for her.

Helen crossed her arms over her chest. “There a difference between speaking privately and complete privacy. What is going on, Solas?”

"I apologize for the secrecy, but this is an issue that we should discuss away from prying eyes as well as ears."

Helen frowned but stepped inside. Solas closed the door behind them and waved his hand. Several candles lit up.

He gestured to a small bench against the wall. They sat down, and he took her left hand into both of his without bothering to ask.

“I learned more about how much the mark has been paining you from the Qunari I just met than I have from the woman who has borne it for months and whom I call friend.”

She looked at his face while he looked into her hand. He looked angry, almost.

“I did not speak of it to the Iron Bull or anyone else, Solas.”

“He is a spy. He observed you hiding it.” Good lord, he's in a tetchy mood tonight.

“Solas, has it occurred to you that the pain will never go away? That perhaps this is just something I must learn to live with?”

The anger faded from his expression. “Yes,” he said quietly. Still not looking at her, he released a healing spell into her hand that nearly made her moan out loud in relief.

While he worked on her hand, Helen looked around the cabin. It had been abandoned for some
time. Ferns and grass grew through what was left of the rotting floorboards but the furniture was free of dust, and the hearth had been lately used.

“Somebody has been staying here recently,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed, now looking mildly amused. “Me. I arrived here a few days ago. My presence makes your scouts uncomfortable, so I decided to gift them with my absence.” He released her hand. Then he turned sideways on the bench, keeping one foot on the ground and the other tucked under his knee. “But I did not bring you here to scold you about your hand.”

She turned to face him, mimicking his posture, and waited.

"While you were in the Storm Coast, one of your medics requested my help with an unusual case they had in the infirmary. They received a young woman who complained of nausea and fatigue. As she was known to have recently had a Templar lover, pregnancy was the most likely cause of her symptoms, but she would not allow them to check.

"However, when her hair began to fall out, they asked me for help. I examined her and discovered that not only was she with child, but she had also been poisoned. Specifically, she had eezo poisoning."

Helen's eyebrows raised. “And?”

“And I sent for Commander Rutherford. He questioned the young woman, who revealed that she was, in fact, Ivans' lover. He had stolen your belongings from the Chantry and asked her to hide them. Leliana discovered this within a week.”

Helen sat up a little straighter. “Wait. Within a week of my arrest?”

“Yes. The young woman was allowed to keep your clothing and wore it until quite recently.”

Which was why stupid Ivans' stupid girlfriend had eezo poisoning, but all Helen cared about was, “Where's my omnitool?”

"Leliana kept it. She sent it away for testing, but it was returned to her quite some time ago."

Helen's heart started to race.

"I do not know all the particulars, but Commander Rutherford was able to retrieve it from her." Solas fiddled with the jawbone he always wore around his neck. "He sends it with the message, 'I hope you hear your parent's voices again.'"

And there, in Solas' elegant hands, lay her Savant BIO (Biotic Initiative Omnitool), made specifically and exclusively for the biotics of the Andromeda Initiative.

Helen gasped. Her hands shook so badly, she was afraid to drop it as she slowly removed it from Solas' palm.

*Please still work please still work please still work*...she breathed the words over and over like a prayer.

She slipped it over her right wrist. The omnitool chirped once as it recognized the sub-dermal nanosensors and read her DNA. Small dots of orange light blinked in a running pattern as it booted up.
The haptic interface bloomed into existence, bathing herself and Solas in its orange glow. “Greetings,” said the VI's voice. Helen's heart throbbed at hearing her own tongue, no matter how impersonal or mechanical.

Her eyes were so glazed over with tears that the interface was a blur, but still, her left hand tapped out the file location unerringly, the muscle memory a part of her.

She scrolled past the vids of a dozen crews, of office parties in Vancouver, of goofing off in basic training. She ticked past them all until she found the one she needed to hear most.

The recording came to life in full color above Helen's right hand. The camera was pointed at her father, his dark gray eyes and dark brown beard smiling. Helen realized with a shock that she was older now than either of her parents had been when the vid was recorded.

“In today's episode of 'The Adventures of Raising Helen,' we face a new problem: how did the 8-year-old get stuck in the tree?” He turned the camera around and focused it at the foot of a sweet gum maple. Dozens of wind turbines twirled lazily in the background.

Mom stood at the bottom of the tree. A little girl could be seen near the top branches, at least four stories off the ground.

Daddy joined her “Your fault,” Mom said, wryly. “You taught her how to climb.”

“Sweetheart,” Daddy said, clearly amused, “what are you doing?”

“Oh,” 8-year-old Helen was trying to sound casual, “just looking around.”

“And how's the view?” Daddy asked.

“It's good. There's a frisbee on the roof.”

“Do you want to come down now?” Daddy asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to do it by yourself or do you want me to come help?”

Helen seemed to give it some thought. “I might need some help.”

Daddy swiftly climbed the tree. Moments later, he was in the swaying green branches looking at a little girl wearing denim cut-offs and a faded t-shirt that said “Arcturus Station, Future Resident.”

Helen did not look the least bit scared. If anything, she looked terribly pleased with herself.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hello, Helenmelon.”

“There's the frisbee,” she grinned, pointing to the red disc on the roof.

“There's the frisbee,” Daddy agreed. There was a pause. You could hear the moment he cottoned on. He let out an exasperated breath. “Oh my god, you didn't.” And when Helen threw her head back and laughed, you could see every single tooth she'd lost.

“Helen Trevelyan!” Daddy was doing a poor job of sounding angry.
“I just made you climb a tree!”

“I can’t believe I fell for that!” he groaned. “How long have you been able to get up and down without help?”

“A week,” Helen giggled.

“She tricked me!” Daddy yelled down to Mom.

“Shocker!” Mom yelled back. A minute later, she was there, too. She let go of a branch just long enough to fist bump her daughter. “That’s my girl! Outwitting the men.”

The camera turned back to Daddy. "Outwitted? Outnumbered is more like it." But the love and joy in his eyes shone clearly. Then he turned the camera back around, so his wife and daughter were in the foreground, looking over their farm.

They stood there for a moment. It had been a beautiful summer day. Daddy leaned over and kissed first Helen's head and then Mom's head.

“Love you guys,” he said.

“Love you, too, Daddy.”

Helen, her face streaming tears, tapped her omnitool again. The interface vanished.

She clapped both hands over her face to keep all of the screaming inside. That life, that beautiful life, with loving parents and honest work—Helen had wanted that for herself so badly. She could never get her parents back, but she could go to Andromeda and honor them by building a new home. She could have shown her own children that vid someday and told them stories about their grandparents. Would her children have had her father's eyes or her mother's freckles, as Helen did?

She would never know. That path was forever closed to her now.

A sob escaped her. She couldn't help it. Solas tentatively placed a hand on her shoulder. Another sob, and then a third.

“I don't belong here,” she whispered. Solas slid his arm around her and gently pulled her into an embrace.

The dam broke. Helen wept and wept, mourning the loss of her family, both past, and future.

Solas rocked her like a child, murmuring words of comfort in Common and Elvish. She lost all sense of time as some of the pain she had been hoarding for so long emptied out.

When she finally calmed, Helen realized that Solas was cradling her against his chest. She was too wrung out to be embarrassed, but it occurred to her that Solas might feel differently.

“Solas. I am so sorry,” she said, as she started to sit up.

“There is no need to apologize,” he said. He did not stop her from sitting upright but neither did he seem interested in pushing her away. Helen rested her head against his shoulder. They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes.

“You favor your mother,” he said quietly.

“Thank you.” Thinking again about what her own children might have looked like brought fresh
tears to her eyes, although she was much calmer this time.

“I can never have children,” she whispered. It felt like a confession. “Everyone who joined the Initiative agreed to a reversible form of sterility. We wanted to make certain our habitats were sustainable first, that we could feed everybody before we started families.

“But I do not know how to reverse the sterility. The people that did know died thousands of years ago.”

Solas wrapped his arm around her shoulder again and pulled her close. “Ir abelas, my friend.”

“Tel abelas. It certainly isn't your fault. And it hardly matters now. Even if I do survive the Breach...”

Helen sat up fully, tapped the omnitool and scanned her left hand. The scanner hummed. Solas said nothing but his attention shifted, became more focused.
Finally, the scanner beeped. The results flashed in front of her. “UNKNOWN PLASMA.”

“That makes no sense at all,” she said.

“What makes no sense?” Solas asked.

“The scanner is telling me the mark is an unknown plasma, but plasma would have burned my hand away in seconds.”

Solas said nothing as she asked the VI in English, “What's today's date?”

“11 July, 12,469 Galactic Standard.”
*Four months.* Helen checked the security files since she'd landed on Thedas. There were several, beginning with one that was over six hours long on the day she'd arrived. The others lasted anywhere from a few minutes to an hour. In all, she had over ten hours of security feed she needed to go through, preferably in private.

And then there was the matter of trying to find out what had happened to the Initiative. It must have succeeded on some level, or Thedas wouldn't exist in its current state.

But for the moment, Helen had more important priorities than the details of the Initiative's early days.

“Run full medical scan, please.”

“Acknowledged.”

“And engage combat protocols.”

“Acknowledged.”

The omnitool magnetized itself to the nanosensors and eezo nodules under her skin, making it much harder for the omnitool to be taken from her or knocked off.

It also routed the VI's vocal articulations through Helen's UT, keeping her communications with the VI private.

Helen tapped it back off.

“Fascinating. What did you just do?” Solas asked.

"It's running a medical scan. I engaged combat protocols to make it much harder for anybody to remove the omnitool without my consent. And I asked what the date was." Helen shook her head. "I have been here four months, and my life has been pulled so far out of shape I hardly recognize it."

Solas shifted back a bit and turned his head to look at her. "Not so very far," he said. "I saw you in camp today. You gathered new intelligence, made decisions, coordinated your personnel. You have long practice with command, and it shows. Nothing you did today appeared unfamiliar to you at all."

Helen gave a small smile. “The ability to sift through military bureaucracy hardly qualifies as leadership. But I take your point. And thank you for saying so.”

“How will you explain the omnitool to the others?”

“No idea. Trial and error, I expect.”

After a moment, she stood up and said, “We should head back before they send out a search party.”

“Agreed.” He stood up as well.

They looked at each other for a moment. Something had again shifted between them. Solas looked older somehow, as if the mask he was used to wearing all the time no longer fit very well.
“Thank you for bringing me here, for allowing me this privacy,” she said quietly. “It means a great deal to me.”
“Sathem lasa halani, Helen. It was the least I could do.” Solas waved the candles out and opened the door. The walked side by side as they headed back to camp.

Helen went to bed exhausted and heartsick.

She woke up furious.

Advisors,

Solas has returned my omnitool to me.

Had I been informed immediately that my belongings had been located, a young woman would not be suffering from radiation poisoning. Nor would her unborn child be at such risk. In utero exposure to element zero is exceedingly dangerous. Biotic abilities such as mine are rare. Stillbirths, brain tumors, cancers and other congenital disabilities are far more common.

Once I can examine the young woman, I will be able to tell you more about her condition and the condition of her unborn child. Until then, please tell the Medical Corps that the mother should remain in quarantine for at least a week. She needs to drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids and should bathe at least once a day. Her urine, fecal matter, and wastewater need to be disposed of away from the rest of the population, and in a manner that will not contaminate the local water supply.

Likewise, my clothing should be buried far away from any water source. Do not, under any circumstances, burn the clothing.

Let the spymaster know that she and I will need to speak privately as soon as I arrive back in Haven.

Then she made a point of signing her name and all of her titles in English. She rolled up the scroll, attached it to a raven and sent it away. Then she took a fresh scroll and wrote,

Commander,

It was good to hear their voices again. No matter how angry I am at your spymaster, please know that I bear you no ill-will whatsoever. Whatever happens, you have my deepest gratitude.

I am in your debt,

H. Trevelyen

That one was sent on its way as well. Then she wrote the only one that hurt.

Dear Josie,

Did you know?

She didn't want to think Josie would have hidden something so important, but the fact was, Helen had spent hardly any time in Haven, and didn't know any of her advisors very well at all. Josephine had known Leliana for years. Why wouldn't she be more loyal to her than to Helen?

Didn't change the fact that it hurt. Helen adored Josie and considered her to be one of the only true friends she'd made on Thedas.

As Helen and the ground team packed up and prepared to leave, the VI privately read Helen the results of her medical scan.
It was worse than she had known. She had lost 11% of her body mass. Her bone density was down by 8%. Gum disease had set in. She needed better nutrition and a better way to clean her teeth, and soon.

Some of the tissues in her left hand were undergoing changes at the cellular level. It did not surprise her, but it was still damned inconvenient knowledge. Even if she survived the Breach, the mark would eventually lead to cancer, or gangrene, or god only knew what else.

The VI finished its private intonation of her doom by suggesting she check in with the nearest Alliance medical facility. "This fucking planet," she muttered, in English, as she fastened the cinch on her horse's saddle.

She must have been louder than she intended. Solas, who was saddling up his beautiful Forder, looked over at her. "Is something wrong, Herald?" he asked.

Helen did not want to share her anger with the others, but she also did not want to pretend around Solas. "Vin," she said. "Ar ema ir nin." Yes. I am very angry.

He said nothing as Sera and Bull ambled over to put their gear on their own mounts. Helen walked her horse to the edge of camp to wait for the others. Solas joined her a moment later. "Tell me what angers you this morning," he said quietly.

She told him how she woke up furious with Leliana, as well as the results of her medical scan. Solas frowned and got all pedantic again. "Helen, there is no reason for you to become malnourished. You should have spoken up before now. It is no burden on your ground team if we need to hunt a little more game or gather a few more resources like berries and apples."

At the word, "apples," Mor'Lanun rested its head on Solas' shoulder. Solas absentmindedly reached up and stroked the horse's nose and scratched behind its ears. He murmured to it in his native tongue. "Yes, yes, you poor little thing. You have such a hateful disposition. If you do not immediately become more affectionate towards me, I will have no choice but to give you more sugar."

Helen laughed.

Solas looked over at her, confusion on his face. "I am sorry, Solas, but I cannot help it. Look at him! You have spoiled your horse rotten."

Solas' expression turned haughty. "You shall not mock my horse in my presence, Herald. He is neither spoiled nor rotten, and he was a gift from a dear friend," he said, as Mor'Lanun drooled onto his armor.

Helen's smile went wide. "How thoughtless of me. My sincerest apologies, Ser Mor'Lanun."

Sera and Bull walked up with their mounts. "Where to, Boss?"

Helen looked at Solas. "You know where this Elvhen artifact is?"

"I believe so, yes."

"Then lead the way."
Helen, her anger forgotten for the moment, mounted her own horse and headed out into the countryside with the rest of her team.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to my betas for their feedback and thoughts. I really can't emphasize enough just how much work they put into each chapter.

Not to mention, ProcrastiKate (http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/) has gifted us with another stunning render of Helen using the omnitool on her mark. She puts literally hours and hours of her time and talent into each of these scenes. Every one of them is a work of art in its own right.

Finally, thank you to everybody who has given comments, kudos, and reviews. I am humbled and grateful to all of you.

UPDATE: After a very informative discussion with qwikitty, and a bit of research, I made changes to the chapter as it was originally posted to make Helen's dental health concerns more realistic (from the roots of her teeth dissolving to gum disease.) Sometimes, I get so caught up in making sure that I am being true to the lore of BioWare that I forget my obligation to due diligence in the real world. Thank you qwikitty for the feedback, I appreciate it!
Chapter twenty-seven

Chapter Summary

Solas meets Sera and Bull.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty-seven

Solas had been more than happy to take Helen's omnitool to the Hinterlands. Haven was an oppressive, boring little town. Traveling alone allowed him to drop his mask for several days.

He took the opportunity to examine the omnitool. He had never seen the metal before. He did not recognize the maker's mark, nor the language used. He scanned it with his magic. He found two tiny nodules of element zero embedded at each end of the bracelet, and even that was only because already knew how to recognize eezo.

Discerning nothing else, Solas turned to the other problem with the omnitool—whether to give it to Helen in front of the others or to pull her aside and deliver it in private.

Giving it to her in front of the others was risky. Solas had strong opinions about allowing a Ben-Hassrath to even know it existed. He also did not think Helen would want the others to see her reaction to getting it back.

For she would react to it. He had seen her reach for it every day. He knew, better than anybody else, how she struggled to keep her composure in front of others. The return of something so important would shatter that control. Privacy was almost certainly what Helen would prefer.

Privacy was what Solas preferred, too. That was the problem.

**

He should not have been so happy to see her again.

She arrived with Sera, Vivienne, and one of the oddest Qunari that Solas had ever seen. Had he not already known the Iron Bull was Ben-Hassrath, he would have mistaken him for Tal-Vashoth. Bull carried a thick layer of suet around his middle that indicated a fondness for drink and rich foods. His relaxed manner made him appear open and friendly.

Solas did not trust him for one moment.

Helen looked exhausted but her smile, when she saw him, was genuine. He allowed himself a small smile back.

She introduced him to the Iron Bull.

“So, you're the creepy fade mage.”
“And you are the hulking Qunari spy.”

Helen's smile vanished. She made a small noise of disgust and walked away to focus on her duties.

Solas regretted his tone. Whatever issues he had with the Qunari, he had not intended to make Helen's job any harder than it already was.

“You know about her hand, right?”

Solas, who had watched Helen walk away, turned a cold gaze onto Bull and raised his eyebrows. He said nothing, lest he snap in frustration that yes, you mindless fool, I know about the Herald's hand!

"She's good about not letting it show, but she's in a lot of pain."

“I suspected as much when she failed to answer my questions about it. Does the First Enchanter lack even basic healing skills?” He said it loud enough that Vivienne would overhear him.

The First Enchanter stopped talking to an Inquisition Scout long enough to look Solas up and down with distaste. “My skills are no concern of yours, apostate.”

“As I appear to be the only mage capable of assisting the Herald with the mark, perhaps you are correct.”

Vivienne's eyes narrowed and glittered. “The Herald asked for my assistance outside of combat exactly once—for a headache caused by one of those horrid skulls. Had she requested help for any other injury, I would have rendered whatever aid I am capable of giving. As she asked for nothing, I let the matter lie, something you would do well to consider.”

“And is that your role? To do only what is asked and nothing more? I suppose I should not have expected anything else from a Circle mage.”

Vivienne gave him a smile of false indulgence. "Is that what you imagine my motives are? To save myself the bother? Solas, darling, whatever else she is, the Herald is a grown woman who knows her own mind. I am not her mother, and she is no child. I will not treat her like one."

Then she turned her back to him.

Solas let the matter drop. Vivienne was correct. Helen was not a child.

But it was hard to remember that a few hours later when she fell to pieces in his arms.

He had not been overly surprised by the omnitool's capabilities, given the advanced state of technology he had glimpsed from the Herald's dream. Yet even without the emotional resonance of the Fade, even without understanding the language, the clarity of her father's memory was both astounding and heartbreaking. Helen had been a precious child.

He had allowed himself a small kindness—just a hand on her shoulder, as any friend would do. It was appropriate and safe.

Then she'd whispered, "I don't belong here," and he gave up any concerns about propriety. Solas might be a man out of time, but Thedas was his home. Helen was a stranger and an orphan with no touchstones left to her. He was her friend. He could comfort her in this.
For a space of time, he did not worry about the orb or the Breach. He told her that he had her, that she was safe here, *ir abelas, falon. Ir abelas*. By the time she calmed down, he was cradling her, her face buried in his chest and their arms around each other. She became aware of herself and sat up, apparently worried about his disapproval.

He did not disapprove but let her set the boundaries for where she was comfortable. She told him about her inability to have children.

Then she did something he never expected. She used the omnitool to scan the Anchor.

Solas could say with absolute certainty what anybody on Thedas might see when they examined the mark. He understood what it looked like both mages and non-mages, to mortals and Elvhen. He could *not* say what Helen would find, with her outsider’s perspective and a set of tools he could have never anticipated.

Fen’Harel was intensely interested in the results of her scan. Would it reveal something he could use? Would it reveal something she could use against him? Either way, it was yet another reminder to him how profoundly dangerous and critical Helen was to his plans.

But the expected thrill of danger in getting caught and the pleasure he had always taken in using his wits to keep discovery at bay did not materialize. He only felt tremendously old and tremendously sad. She was just one more good person the Dread Wolf would eventually chew to bits.

Solas realized that some part of his facade had fractured open. He did not think he would be able to close it again.

**

The following morning, as they worked their way through the Crossroads of the Hinterlands towards an Elvhen artifact, Bull tried to talk Sera into letting him throw her across the field of battle during combat.

Sera—immature, reckless, obnoxious Sera—said no. Solas was pleasantly surprised by this uncharacteristic burst of wisdom from the elf. Stupidity seemed to be her strong suit.
Then Helen, with far too much enthusiasm, said: "I'll do it."

“Herald!” Solas snapped, appalled and angry.

She did not hear him over the exuberance of Bull's response and Sera's encouragement. Helen insisted to Bull that they practice it outside of combat first.


"The practice is for Bull's benefit, not mine. He will need to learn to compensate for the force of a biotic push. Otherwise, he will lose his balance just as we enter combat."

“As if that makes the whole idea less unreasonable!"

He stayed in an ill temper until an Inquisition scout warned them about some unusually well-armed bandits in the area. They were soon fighting again. Whatever else he could say about the Iron Bull or Sera - and he could say plenty - they were extremely skilled.

They approached the entrance of the ruin and found a Dalish mage with June's ugly markings battling a rage demon. They killed the demon before they'd even dismounted. After tying the horses under a copse of trees, they introduced themselves to her.

The Dalish mage was none other than Mihris, First Fool and sole survivor of the ironically named Clan Virnehn. Given the part she had played in keeping control of the eluvian network away from Solas, part of him wanted to strike her down where she stood. How different would things be now if he had the eluvians back? Would he have been able to find a better solution than Corypheus?

Felassan would still be alive, at the very least.

Solas gripped his staff and kept his face impassive. Still, when Mihris lied to Helen about why she was in the Hinterlands, he could not stay completely silent.

“You lie, child,” he said in Elvish. She changed the subject.

Rubble blocked the entrance to the ruin. Mihris called him, "flat-ear," and all but dared him to use his magic to move it.

Helen's eyes narrowed at the Dalish mage, but Solas was glad to hear it. It meant that Mihris had no idea who he was. He resolved only to speak Elvish when addressing her directly. Let her wonder about the "flat-ear" who knew more of the People's tongue than a Dalish first.

Just to make a point, he not only removed the rubble, but he also returned the stones to their original places in the wall.

Demons attacked them as soon as they entered the tomb. Helen's barrier protected all five of them. Mihris' eyes widened at Helen's biotics.

Once the demons had been dispatched, Mihris said stalked over to Helen and demanded, “How did you make that barrier?”

Helen showed Mihris her little biotic bubble. “What kind of shem magic is that?” Mihris asked, her voice suddenly full of venom.

“It is not magic at all, shem or otherwise,” Helen said. She lowered her arm and joined Bull and Sera, who were already poking around the chests along the back wall. She did not look back to see
whether Mihris accepted her answer or not.

Solas heard a whisper from the brazier by the archway. He looked at it, puzzled for a moment, then...ah. Yes. He had heard of this Veilfire. It was remarkable how the modern elves had adapted to the Veil and used it for new purposes that he could never have foreseen.

He lit the brazier, explained what it was, and ignored Sera's complaints. They descended into the tomb, fighting several more demons that tried to block their passage.

There, finally, was one of the thousands of devices he had used to create the Veil.

Solas beckoned the Herald to his side. “Any mage can activate this by touching it with a bit of the Fade,” he explained. “I am curious as to whether you can do the same using the mark.”

Helen raised her left hand towards the artifact. It sparked to life, and within seconds, its shielding wards swirled their prismatic reflections around it. He felt the Veil around them thicken and smooth.

"Well done," he said, but his eyes were on the artifact. His greatest achievement and his greatest failure, symbolized in a bit of discarded metal. How many centuries did it sit in this tomb, used as the focal point for the dead, instead of shielding the living?
"It is quite beautiful, isn't it?" Helen said. She studied it with interest, a small smile on her face. She started to reach for her right wrist, but Solas stopped her. He glanced at Mihris, who was digging around in an urn, then back at Helen. Helen nodded her understanding.

Mihris stood up, holding something in her hand that called to Solas. It was an ancient, enchanted pendant, containing a minuscule amount of pre-Veil magic. Such items had been as common as dirt in Arlathan. The Elvhen would wear them to give a minor boost to their focus, nothing more. Even as a slave, Solas had used and discarded hundreds of such items with no thought at all.

Now, it was a small bit of precious power that he desperately needed.

Mihris bragged about the good fortune of her find. Announcing that their alliance had concluded, she began to leave.

Solas loomed over Mihris, blocking her path. “You asked us for help. You are now in our debt,” he said in Elvish, as he held his hand out.

Mihris looked up at him, as she took in his height, the width of his shoulders, and his hard, violet eyes.

Felassan warned you that you would not want to meet his clan, did he not? He could smell her fear, which was fine with him.

“I...perhaps you are right,” she said, handing him the amulet. “Go with Mythal's blessing.”

“May your path be victorious,” he said dismissively, again in Elvish, as he closed his fingers around the pendant.

Mihris fled.

“Daft bitch,” Sera said.

Solas privately agreed. He slipped the pendant over his head and tucked it under his tunic, next to his skin. It recognized him immediately as Elvhen and released its power into him. It wasn't much —just a drop in the ocean he would need—but it was more than he'd had when he awoke this morning.

Helen stood by the artifact, looking at it carefully. "Everybody, I need to speak to you all, please."

Solas sighed. It was obvious that Helen was about to disclose the existence of the omnitool to Bull and Sera.

Personally, he thought it a mistake to allow anybody to see it, especially a Ben-Hassrath spy. It would make her even more of a target than she already was.

Once all three of them gathered around her, Helen said, "Bull, Sera, I must show you something, but before I can, I need your oaths that you will not discuss it with anybody outside of the ground team, at least not yet."

Sera shrugged. “Yeah, all right. I can keep a secret.”

Helen nodded, and looked at Bull. "Bull, it is important that my own advisors see this before the Qunari learn of it. Once I return to Haven and meet with them, you can tell your people anything
you like. But until then, I need your word that this goes no further."

“You got it, Boss,” Bull said easily. Solas rolled his eyes. The word of a Ben-Hassrath spy was worthless.

Helen, however, had more to say. “I am not asking for your word as a Qunari. I am asking for your word as a Charger. If you cannot give me an oath of temporary silence, that is fine. I will not hold it against you. However, I will need you to wait outside, please.”

*Clever girl,* appealing to his professional pride like that. A man like Bull would want to be in the know, but if word got out that Bull had broken a term of a contract, business would dry up.

Bull looked at Helen, no doubt calculating his risks. Finally, he held out a giant hand. “All right, Boss, you have my word.”

Helen grasped him by the wrist and forearm and shook. Then she started talking.

"Something important was stolen from me not long after my arrest, but it was recently recovered. Solas kindly returned it to me last night." She raised her right arm up and activated her omnitool.

Sera and Bull startled when it turned on. Sera giggled nervously. Bull's eyes went from the omnitool to the Elvhen artifact, then back to the omnitool. "Is it magic?" he asked.

Helen shook her head. “No. It is technology. We call it an omnitool.”

“What's it do?”

"Mostly, it interfaced with other technology, none of which is on Thedas. Its practical use is going to be relatively limited here. But I wanted you to see a few of the things that it *does* do, so you know what to expect. For example...”

She tapped on it again and vanished from sight.

“That is the tactical cloak you mentioned before,” Solas stated.

“Yes,” she said, reappearing.

Sera laughed. “Nice! That's better than any of my powders. Can you make one for me?”

Helen shook her head. “No, unfortunately.”

Bull looked troubled. “Is that...can you use it as a weapon?”

"Yes, although my best weapon is my biotics. The omnitool has a blade function similar to a dagger. It has other offensive capabilities as well, but I am not very good at them, so I don't use them. Mostly, it scans and stores information." She turned around and scanned the artifact, much like she had the mark the night before.

The omnitool chirped and beeped. “What did it tell you?” Solas asked.

Helen tapped. An image of the artifact that she'd just scanned popped into view over her wrist. "'Composite metal, unknown. Radiation source, unknown.' Anything I scan—plants, animals, anything—the omnitool will catalog them for me.”

“Pffft, boring,” Sera said. “We've done that already, yeah? They're called *books.*"
"Knowledge for its own sake is never a waste of time. And this will let me compare it to what we had back in the Milky Way."

She tapped her wrist again. The interface vanished.

"Is that all it does?" Bull asked.

"It holds many of my memories and information from my own world. I would...rather not go through it all piece by piece. Once we are back in Haven and I speak with the advisors, I can show everything to everybody all at once."

Sera was losing interest and had started glancing around the tomb with an eye for looting.

Bull, however, had crossed his arms across his chest and studied her. "I want to see that dreadnought you told me about."

"The Destiny Ascension?" Helen had a little smile on her face. "Yeah, all right."

She pulled the orange interface back up and spoke into it. After a moment, the ship popped up over her omnitool. It rotated slowly, showing it to be in the shape of a sleek, upside down cross.

Sera left to pick locks on the chests.

"That is an...odd shape for a ship," Solas said.

"It was not designed for water. It was designed for outer space. The crew alone numbered 10,000."

She tapped on her omnitool. The size of the projection grew until it almost touched the ceiling. "Do you see all of those lines of lights?" Bull, who had gone speechless, nodded. "Those were all separate floors. The Ascension was almost 500 stories tall."
“Remarkable,” Solas said. “How long did it take your people to build this?”

“My people didn't build it; the Asari did. Construction lasted a little more than ten years.”

She said it like that was such a long time. Ten years to build a floating fortress which could hold an entire city? That was not a long time. That was barely a heartbeat.

His earlier conflict with Mihris suddenly seemed petty and beneath him. Solas felt a pang of shame for how he had treated the Dalish woman. Whatever sins she had committed, his were far worse.

Helen let the image of the Destiny Ascension float in the air for a moment longer before asking, “Bull? Are we good?”

Bull had been staring at it with his mouth open, his arms hanging slack by his sides. “Yeah. We're good.” His voice was subdued.

Helen tapped the omnitool off. Bull looked like he'd been walloped on the head.

After a moment, Helen said, “Your word, Bull.”

Bull closed his eyes and shuddered. “Shit. If I told my people about that, they’d recall me and put me into re-education. I'll wait until everybody knows and everybody sees, so they don't think I've lost my fucking mind.”
They spent a bit more time helping Sera look for anything useful. Solas re-lit the Veilfire torch and found a recipe for a fire rune on the wall. He showed it to Helen. She scanned it with the omnitool, both with and without the Veilfire.

Finally, the Herald said she needed a bit of time alone to look through “personal information.” She asked for them to please wait for her outside.

Solas did not like the idea of leaving her alone, but he was hardly in any position to complain about the need for solitude.

As they were leaving, Bull asked, "So that's why you took off with her last night? To return that thing?"

“Not that it is any business of yours, but yes. That is exactly why we left.”

“I thought maybe you were just, you know,” he waggled his eyebrows suggestively, “really glad to see her.”

“The Herald is my friend, Bull, nothing more. I am always happy to see my friends.” He kept his voice neutral.

“Come on, Solas, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, he knows what you mean, all right” Sera said. “He's just too elfy to do anything except be boring. The elf always takes the elf so that banging bits will mean something.”

“This is hardly an appropriate topic for discussion.” They stepped outside. Solas wondered if it was too much to hope that Helen could not overhear any of this.

“Sex is always an appropriate topic for discussion,” Bull said. “What do you mean by 'mean something,' Sera? Like, marriage? Commitment?”

Sera said, “Oh, you know, like,” she started thrusting her pelvis in a manner so vulgar it made Solas wince. “Drop 'em and rebuild the empire!” she shouted. Then she roared loud enough that his eardrums hurt.

Solas closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“See?” Sera said to Bull. “Nothing. Like I said. Elfy and boring.”

“Hey, man. No judgment here. You like what you like,”

“Thank you, Bull,” Solas said, exhaling. He opened his eyes and moved into the shade of the ruined portico.

“Besides, if you aren't interested, that means the door's open for me.”

“And me. Although, I dunno, she's kind of plain, yeah? Looks better with hair, though.”

The two of them walked over to where their horses were waiting. Solas stayed near the entrance and leaned against a wall. It was shady and cool. It was away from Sera. And he wanted to make certain that Helen was all right when she rejoined them.

He would not let what Sera and Bull get under his skin. It was none of his business. Besides, Solas doubted a woman as thoughtful as Helen would choose anybody as immature as Sera, regardless of race.
As for Bull, the very idea of somebody as tiny as Helen with that enormous Qunari...

“If you truly believe that only the People are real, what difference does it make whom she courts?”

Wisdom's words came back to him. He contemplated them until he heard Helen's footsteps. She walked out of the ruin, her eyes solemn and worried. He pushed himself off the wall as she joined him.

“Thank you for waiting for me, Solas.” She sounded distracted, her eyes focused on her thoughts.

They joined Sera and Bull, who had pulled out lunch. As they ate, Helen remained quiet, only picking at her food.

“You OK, Boss?” Bull asked.

Helen looked up, blinking a few times as she brought herself back to the present, then took a deep breath and exhaled. "My apologies," she said. Then she started eating her lunch with a bit more of her usual enthusiasm. "So. Do we leave to track down this Grey Warden or do we check the area first for more bandits?"

No, Solas decided, it does not make any difference whom she courts. Not because she was human, but because she was a kind woman sacrificing her own future to save Thedas from his blunders. If she found peace in the arms of another, Solas would be happy for her and give his blessing.

That is what friends did, even when it felt like a hollow, empty lie.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks to my infinitely patient betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen, for the edits, comments, and suggestions on this chapter.

Thank you, as well, to the multi-talented ProcrastiKate, who has given us not one but two renders—the one of Solas and Helen, and the one with the Destiny Ascension. You can find her work at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/

And finally, thank you to all of you reading, reviewing, commenting and leaving kudos. Half-Life is now at 1000+ kudos, which just seems impossible for a fic I nearly deleted in 2016. I am so grateful to have all of you here for Helen's journey.
Chapter twenty-eight

Chapter Summary

Helen finally learns what happened at the Conclave, and begins to put the omnitool to good use.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty-eight

Helen watched the ground team leave the tomb, then opened the haptic interface. She scrolled through the security files and looked for one dated 9 March, 12,069—the day she arrived on Thedas.

She needed to know the answer to Vivienne's question. How had she survived the explosion at the Conclave?

The omnitool had started recording as she'd left the escape pod. Most of the footage showed nothing but ice and snow. She fast forwarded past it and started normal playback at the point where she'd activated her tactical cloak to sneak into the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

The VI had helpfully recorded all of Helen's vital signs. It now displayed them in the bottom right-hand corner of the vid.

*Sweet Jesus,* she'd been in bad shape. Severe dehydration. Both her blood pressure and body temperature had been dangerously low. After being indoors for a few minutes, Helen had started to shiver—a good sign, normally—but her teeth had chattered loud enough to be heard. More than one guard had looked in her direction with a frown on their face. If it hadn't been for the tactical cloak, she would have been caught in no time.

Even worse than the noise was Helen's confusion. She'd been half-delirious, retracing her steps several times without realizing it. She'd opened doors without scanning them first for traps, or to see if there was anybody behind them. A couple of times she'd even muttered, "Where's a goddamn water fountain?" when it should have been evident that none was available.

Helen had descended further and further into the Temple, finding herself in front of a closed door. Her omnitool had recorded voices.

“Why are you doing this? You, of all people?” That must have been Divine Justinia.

“Keep the sacrifice still.” It was the dark, hateful voice that had come from the rift at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

“Someone! Help me!”

Helen watched herself open up the doors—again without scanning it first like she was some FNG. Divine Justinia floated in mid-air, trapped there by human mages in matching armor.
The evil voice belonged to a monstrosity of a man, three meters tall and utterly deformed by the red lyrium growing out of his body. His skin was stretched to such extremes that much of him was exposed bone and sinew.

He held a glowing ball in his hand.

Helen's tactical cloak failed as she'd opened the door, overloaded in the presence of all of the ambient energy. The man, shocked at Helen's sudden appearance, turned his grotesque face towards her.

Helen heard herself demand in English, “What's going on?”

"Kill the intruder."

Justinia smacked the orb right out of his hand.

Then Helen, in her delirium, reached for it.

The orb bound itself to her hand. The omnitool had recorded Helen’s screaming, which lasted right up until the explosion.

The omnitool’s sensors had shorted out for several moments, showing only static. Then they came back online, Helen lay unconscious on her back. The room she had just been in had vanished. The omnitool showed a green sky full of floating boulders and stone monoliths.

The audio picked up footsteps. Then Divine Justinia's face appeared. "Come, my child. This is the Fade. It is not safe here."

Helen had been slow to wake. When she did, she'd rolled over onto all fours and retched up bile. Justinia helped Helen to stand.

“What happened? Where are we?” Helen asked her, her voice sounding slightly hysterical.

Justinia tugged her hand to make her walk. "I do not understand you, but we must hurry!"

Helen had stumbled after the Divine through shards of red lyrium and wet, green rocks. They were heading towards a rift in the distance. "Run!” Justinia said, "They are coming!

Helen looked behind her. The omnitool showed undulating balls of energy following them.

But what Helen had screamed was, “GETH!”

Justinia found a steep stairway that led to a rift. As they climbed it, Helen could hear herself getting both more exhausted and more panicked. She'd kept saying, “Please-no-not-the-Geth, please-no-not-the-Geth.”

Justinia had reached the top first. Instead of going through the rift, she had waited for Helen. "Hurry!” she'd yelled. “The demon!”

Then she had grabbed Helen by the hand and pushed her towards the rift. “Run!” the Divine cried out. “Warn them!”

The omnitool captured Justinia's fate. The balls of energy that had been pursuing them swarmed the Divine, and she had fallen.

Helen stumbled through the Rift and plunged to the ground. Her automatic barrier had not
activated. Her head hit the ground with a loud crack, fracturing her skull and knocking her unconscious.

Guards had come over and carried her off.

“Didja see that woman in the rift?”

“Maker, who's she?”

“Have you ever seen clothes like that?”

“What is that on her hand?”

“Somebody fetch the Seeker!”

Helen watched the rest of the vid at an accelerated speed as she was carried away. She saw nothing but the sky, torn apart by the Breach, with faces occasionally coming into view. Cassandra's angry visage appeared above her for a few minutes. Cullen's did, too, only briefly looking at her with a frown on his face.

Finally, they placed her on a cot in the Chantry dungeon. The recording ended when Leliana removed the omnitool.

Helen rewound the vid to one spot. A bright figure, in the shape of a slender woman wearing Justinia's hat, had looked down at Helen just before the rift had closed.

Helen turned the omnitool off.

She had never believed that she'd been chosen by the Maker or Andraste or anything like that. Still, she might have preferred that to the truth.

What was one of the very first things the Alliance taught about any contraband or unfamiliar tech? “Scan it first!” “Don’t touch the tech!” “You don’t know what you don’t know!”

Is that Alliance toaster really a Blue Suns bomb? Don’t touch. Out of place duffel bag in the corner? Scan it first! Is there a yahg in that box, Lieutenant Epstein? Don’t touch it, scan it first!

She may have been injured, dying, and delirious, but that orb was obviously offensive tech. And Helen had reached for it, like a fucking rookie. Hello, Thedas. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Redshirt Schmuckatelli, Herald of Andraste.

She rewound the vid and watched the scene where she had interrupted the sacrifice. Were those mages Grey Wardens? Helen didn't know that much about them, except that they stopped Blights. Maybe this Blackwall they were meeting would have more information.

And where she'd seen Geth, the omnitool had seen only energy. Had she been hallucinating? Was this one of those Fade things that Solas had talked about?

Helen wanted to return to Haven immediately and show it to the advisors, but that would delay the rescue of the soldiers in the Fallow Mire by at least two weeks. In the meantime, maybe she could find some answers.

She walked back outside. Solas leaned against a wall, waiting for her. Helen functioned on autopilot for a bit, only marginally aware of joining the others. She didn't shake herself out of her daze until Bull asked her if she was all right.
Helen and the ground team spent the rest of the day clearing the area of bandits. They also located another suitable place for an Inquisition forward camp.

It did not take long for the ravens to locate them.

“How the hell does Leliana train these birds?” Helen asked.

“I know! Friggin’ creepy, innit?” Sera said.

Josie's response arrived just after supper.

Dear Helen,

I would have never kept your bracelet from you! Never! Had I known it was right here in Haven, I would have returned it to you myself. I swear this on my honor as an Antivan!

Whatever you need from me to make this right, please tell me. I will make it happen.

I am so incredibly sorry,

Josephine Montilyet

Ambassador, Inquisition

Helen started to pull out her quill and ink, then she remembered—oh yeah. omnitool. She found a blank scroll, laid it flat and scanned it.

“Is this paper IRP receptive?” she asked her VI. Infra-Red Printing allowed omnitools, printers, PDAs and any other number of devices to use a laser to burn content onto a page instead of using ink. However, not all paper was suitable for IRP.

“Affirmative.”

Well, that just made my life easier. Helen fished out the primer that Solas had helped her create all those months ago. “Uploading alphabet of local tongue. Designation, 'Common.' Cross-reference with UT. Flag conflicts.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Who are you talkin' to?” Sera asked.

“My omnitool.”

“Uh, you realize it isn't talking back to you, right?” Bull asked.

“It is, actually,” Helen said, distractedly, her head swiveling back and forth between her omnitool and the book. “Directly into my ear canal.”

She scanned the primer and a few pages of one of the books on monsters that Cullen had loaned her.

“What are you doing, if I may ask?” Solas wanted to know.

“I am teaching my omnitool the Common.”

The omnitool displayed the scanned pages to her. Helen spoke each highlighted word out loud, one
by one, as the omnitool cross-referenced everything in Helen’s UT. It did not take long until the omnitool indicated that it had enough for direct translations.

Helen opened up the QWERTY interface and started typing in English.

    Advisors,

    A group of well-armed and well-organized bandits was embedded east of the Crossroads. We have cleared them out and found their orders. I include a copy with this missive.

    As you can see, my omnitool still functions. Having it back should make correspondence much easier on all of us.

    Sincerely,

    H. Trevelyan

She translated the entire thing into Common and made a few corrections. She scanned the bandit's orders, and included that, as well. Then she held the paper still, pointed the omnitool at it and said, in English, "Print."

A moment later, her letter had been burned neatly into the scroll. Helen grinned, and signed her name with the quill and ink, just so the advisors would know it was really her.

Sera had gone to bed, but Bull and Solas watched with interest.

"Holy shit, can I see that?" Bull asked.

Helen handed him the scroll. Bull looked at it, then picked up the bandit's orders and compared it to Helen's letter. "Is this how your people wrote letters?"

"We did not usually use paper," Helen explained. "We sent them to each other's omnitools."

"I take it that is the 'keyboard' method you told me about," Solas said.

"It is."

"Does it make pictures, too?" Bull said. "Like, that ship you showed us earlier?"

Helen pulled up an image of the Destiny Ascension, found another blank scroll and said, "print." A few seconds later, she handed it to Bull.

He held it with reverence. Then he smiled at Helen so genuinely, he looked about ten years old.

"Herald," Solas said, "I believe it is time for the first watch."

"Is it?" Helen looked at the sky. The moon was higher than she'd expected. "What's the watch order tonight?"

Bull said, "Solas, me, you, Sera. I'm turning in. See you in a few hours, Solas. And Boss?" He rolled up the image of the Destiny Ascension and placed it very carefully into his travel pack.

"Thanks. Seriously. That is just...thanks."

"My pleasure, the Iron Bull."

He winked at her, then crawled into his tent.
Helen pulled up the interface again, this time to respond to Josie's letter.

Dear Josie,

Thank you for letting me know. Don't apologize; you did nothing wrong.

I could use some help, though. My travel rations were stolen before I arrived in the Hinterlands. I am making do with some of the horse feed, but it isn't enough.

Also, does anybody make toothbrushes? I am in danger of losing my teeth. If not, do not worry yourself. You are still my favorite person on Thedas.

Very truly yours,

Helen

"It is fascinating to watch you interact with your own world’s technology." Solas stood several feet away. He had planted the butt of his staff into the ground and now held onto it with both hands, allowing the staff to support some of his weight comfortably.

"Fascinating how?" Helen said as she rolled up the scroll. The ravens had all moved as a group far up into the branches of the trees that overhung their campsite. No overnight post on Thedas, it seems.

“You have struggled for months to master the basics of using a quill and ink. Tonight, in less time than it would have taken you to write a single letter, you taught your omnitool a new language, composed a missive, and created a gift for Bull.”

She could not tell from Solas' tone whether he was upset by this or not. He often had a roundabout way of making his point, so Helen waited.

He gathered his thoughts for a moment longer. “It makes me wonder what you will be capable of if our world ever becomes as familiar to you as your own.”

"I suppose we will have to see if I live that long," Helen said, looking at her left hand before she stood up and placed the scroll into her travel pack. She had questions for Solas, but she was exhausted. The questions could wait. She yawned and picked up her pack. "On nydhea, Solas.”

“On nydhea, Helen.”

**

Helen sent her letters in the morning. She still had no damn idea how those birds knew where to go and who to find.

After breakfast, she opened up the scanner, but before she could go any further, Bull said, “You know, Boss, you probably shouldn't use that thing where lots of people can see it.”

“I agree,” Solas chimed in. “Many people will mistake it for unknown magic or a dangerous enchantment, which could make you more of a target than you already are.”

“Or worse, they'll understand that it's very advanced technology,” Bull said, “which also makes you a target.”

That both men gave the same advice gave Helen pause. She'd mostly thought about what the omnitool could do and why she'd wanted it back. She hadn't given much thought to how it would
Otherwise, it was the only thing that Bull and Solas agreed on over the next several days. Solas viewed the Qun as little better than slavery. Bull saw Ferelden and Orlais as “sick.”

They'd argue. Solas would get the last, bitter word. Bull would think about it; then he'd be back with new counter-arguments.

Helen and Sera stayed out of it, although Sera would sometimes mimic being hanged by the neck.

Helen, meanwhile, got into the habit of taking samples of flora, fauna, and minerals they came across. Every night, when she was in her tent and shielded from view, she would scan whatever she'd found.

Sera bitched about it because the light from the omnitool kept her awake. Helen did it anyway because when else was she supposed to do this?
After a couple of days, Helen had learned a few things.

Not surprisingly, all of the minerals she came across had Milky Way counterparts. Iron was iron. Onyx was onyx. Obsidian was obsidian. Oddly enough, drakestone was also obsidian, with “unknown contaminant.”

Embrium, spindleweed and blood lotus seemed to be native to Thedas, or at least, had no counterpart in the Milky Way. Same with nugs.

Everything else she'd encountered, however, at least so far, were all descended from flora and fauna in the Milky Way.

The druffalo was a genetic hybrid of the American Bison and the Texas Longhorn, with some gene therapy for fertility, docility and milk production.

Rams, bears, dogs, and foxes were unmodified descendants of Milky Way species, although several thousand years of natural selection on Thedas had made bears far more aggressive.

Elfroot was a highly modified type of oregano, with its antimicrobial properties enhanced. Helen asked Solas if it was safe to chew on the leaves.

He looked at her strangely. “Why?”

“I am trying to keep my teeth.”

“Ah. Chew the root, then. And yes, it's safe, in moderate quantities.”

The plants and animals had branched off from their Initiative DNA core between 9000 and 9500 years ago.

One night, Sera was using her knife to chop her bangs. Helen asked for a bit of Sera's hair.
“Why?” Sera asked suspiciously.

“I want to scan it.”

Sera shrugged and handed over a piece of blond hair. Helen ran it under the scanner.

**Homo sapiens sapiens, unknown variant. Do you want to sequence? Y/N.**

Helen hit “Y.”

“Wot's it say?”

“That we're basically the same race.”

Sera snorted, “Don't tell Solas. You'll ruin his whole life. No, wait. *Do* tell him!”

Sera was nursing a grudge against Solas. They had closed a rift the day before, the first one they had come across since Solas and Sera had been on the same ground team.

Before the rift, Solas had ignored Sera as much as possible. Now, he pestered her with questions. As one of “our people”, what did she see when she looked at the Breach? What did she hear when he spoke “our people's” language? Was she moved by the fact that they were in an area where “our people” used to thrive?

Sera was having none of it. The more Solas tried to get her to self-identify as an elf, the more Sera pushed back. Her antics and insults got under Solas' skin. He took her rejection of Elven culture very personally, which Sera viewed as a sort of victory.

A few minutes after Helen and Sera had gone to bed, Helen's omnitool beeped in her ear, letting her know that Sera's DNA analysis was complete. Helen rolled over, her back to Sera, and opened up the screen.

Well. It certainly made for interesting reading.

Sera's DNA was *homo sapiens sapiens*. However, the elven phenotypes that Helen had assumed were the result of natural selection—ears, eyes and facial structure—were, in fact, genetic modifications.

Humans had been using gene therapy for generations, either in utero or within hours of birth. Everything from neurological disease to astigmatism had been or was being eliminated when Helen had left the Milky Way.

What she was looking at now weren't corrections of defects in the genetic code. These were enhancements.

Ears were larger and longer, and the ear canal contained more hair cells to improve hearing. The sinuses cavities had been pushed forward slightly to accommodate bigger eyeballs. The eyes, in turn, had wider irises, with more rods and cones on the retina. And there was the addition of a *tapetum lucidum* behind the retina, giving elves their superior night vision.

But the most significant change was to the nervous system. There were millions of special receptors for...Helen had no idea. But they were there. Most of Sera's appeared to be dormant. These traits were recessive alleles, which explained why human-elf parents had human children.

It was all highly illegal. At least, it had been back in Helen's time.
“Oi! Turn that friggin' thing off! Tryin' to sleep here.” Sera had dramatically thrown her arm over her eyes.

“Sorry,” Helen said, tapping it off. It plunged the tent back into darkness.

“Why do you hafta look at that all the time, anyway?” Sera asked.

“Force of habit. I was a researcher back on Earth. I suppose I am looking for answers to questions I have.”

“Now you sound like Solas,” she mumbled.

Sera meant it as an insult, but Helen just grinned in the dark and said, "No. This sounds like Solas.” In a low voice, she said, “Pala adahl’en, da’len.""  

“Wot's that shite mean?”

“It means, 'Go fuck a forest, little girl.'”

Sera giggled and took her arm off her eyes. “Where'd you learn that?”

“So ‘Solas curses a lot during combat.”

“I'll bet he does. It's always the proper ones, innit?”

Considering most of the English Helen had uttered on Thedas had been pure blasphemy, she just hummed in agreement.

**

They reached Upper Lake camp the following evening. A lovely supply of trail mix, jerky, and dried fruit was waiting for Helen, along with a letter from Josie.

Dearest Helen,

It should not surprise you to hear that your letters made quite an impression. I would not have believed your bracelet capable of it had you not sent me the proof yourself.

I have spoken with the other advisors. We will make sure that the Inquisition camps do a better job of keeping your provisions safe.

As for a toothbrush, it isn't that I have never seen one. It is just that they are considered to be, shall we say, luxury items. I will check with my contacts, however, and see what we can find.

Please stay safe, Helen. I am so looking forward to seeing you again soon!

Love,

Josephine

They located Blackwall outside a fisherman's shack, showing a group of young men how to use their shields.

Blackwall appeared to be in his early 40s. He was tall and broad. He was sturdy but not overweight —what her mother would have once called "big-boned." A luxurious beard covered most of his face.
Helen didn’t know much about the Grey Wardens, but she did understand military organizations. Equipment tended to be uniform in both quality and design. Insignia and logos were open and evident for all to see. The mages in the Conclave recording had all worn matching armor.

Blackwall's equipment, by contrast, was a hodge-podge. He carried a low-quality shield but a high-quality sword. His armor looked nothing like the armor Helen had seen in the vid and appeared to have been poorly repaired in the field. In fact, the *only* thing that Blackwall wore that identified him as a Grey Warden was the griffon stamped onto his ill-fitting breastplate.
To her eyes, Warden Blackwall looked like a solo merc who had looted his equipment from the dead.

Helen walked out into the open with her ground team and announced her presence. “Blackwall? Warden Blackwall?”

Blackwall barely had time to get defensive before they were ambushed.

The fight did not last long. Helen deliberately held back, using only her barrier to shield the others. She wanted to observe.

Whatever his crappy equipment said about him, Blackwall moved with a fluidity that belied his large size. Cassandra tended to use brute force in a fight. Her shield was a much as weapon as her sword. Blackwall, in contrast, was all about timing and precision. He hardly needed his shield. In fact, he even dropped it at one point in favor of using a two-handed grip.

Once the fight was over, Blackwall told his “conscripts” to take back what had been stolen and to return to their homes. “You saved yourselves,” he said.

After the boys had left, Blackwall turned on Helen. “You're no farmer,” he said. “How do you know my name?” He paced the ground like a bear in a cage.

"I'm an agent of the Inquisition. We are investigating whether the disappearance of the Wardens has any connection to the murder of Divine Justinia."

Blackwall stopped pacing. The look of shock on his face indeed seemed genuine.

He said he didn't know that "they" had disappeared but "we" sometimes do that because there wasn't a Blight. He insisted that the Wardens couldn't have been involved in murdering the Divine because "our purpose isn't political."

He explained that, as a Warden, he was allowed to conscript people. He had “conscripted” the young victims of the bandits, taught them how to defend themselves and then let them go. “Next time, they won't need me.”

He answered Helen's questions about the treaties quickly enough. However, he hedged his answers about where the Wardens had gone and why he hadn't disappeared along with them. He wasn't sure. Maybe they went to HQ. Maybe a runner got lost or something.

About the only thing he said with any confidence was that he had planned to be on his own for years.

Helen didn't know what to do. This guy was hiding something, but his confusion about the Divine’s murder and the Warden's whereabouts seemed authentic.

Oh, fuck this noise. Leliana was the one who wanted me to track him down. He's her problem.

“As there's no Blight,” Helen asked, “would you consider lending your talents to the Inquisition? We’re receiving young recruits every day. We could use your experience teaching others how to fight.”

Blackwall decided that was a good idea.

“Lovely. Welcome to the Inquisition. Do you know how to get to Haven?”
“Yes.”

“Good. When you get there, ask for Sister Nightingale. Tell her that Trevelyan sent you.”


“Good. Safe travels. See you in Haven.”

1Thank you, Project Elvhen! https://archiveofourown.org/works/3553883/chapters/7826705

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So much credit goes to Dreadlordcherrycake, Duinewermen, and ProcrastiKate. They were co-creators on this chapters, as much as they were betas and illustrators. “Half-Life” is a group effort, and I am deeply grateful to all three of them for their help and patience.

This chapter was stupid hard to pull together. Having to balance some necessary world-building with appropriate pacing and character development is messy. It's just messy. There really isn't any other way to describe it. This chapter went through four revisions before I had a final draft I could live with. My betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinewermen, were both incredibly patient and gave amazing feedback. They went through each and every one version. I've said it before, I'll say it again. This story would not be here without them.

ProcrastiKate has blessed us with another fantastic render, of Helen scanning stuff in her tent. For those of you who don't know anything about making renders, what ProcrastiKate is doing with each of these renders is TONS of work. For example, I keep writing about Helen being her "underarmor," something that does not exists in any of the games. ProcrastiKate created some. Her work is amazing. She's amazing. She can be found over at: http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/

FYI, I made a change to Chapter 26 regarding Helen's teeth (from the roots of her teeth dissolving to the more medically accurate gum disease.) Thank you to qwikitty for the feedback, I appreciate it! (I don't suppose any of you out there happen to be experts in genetics?)

Thank you, ALL OF YOU, who have been reading, commenting, leaving kudos and reviews. I am so grateful to all of you for joining Helen on her journey.
Chapter twenty-nine

Chapter Summary

Getting out of the Hinterlands is entirely too much work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter twenty-nine

The Herald usually entered combat with a muted emotional spectrum, borne of both experience and a natural self-control. Solas had only seen that calmness truly shattered during her first encounter with a despair demon.

Perhaps that was why her reaction to the giant spiders had been so entertaining.

They were making their way south when a cluster of giant spiders blocked their path forward, waving their front legs menacingly at the team. A couple of the spiders audibly clicked their mandibles.

Helen—grounded, calm, practical Helen—let out an ear-piercing, “EEEEEEWWWWW!” In the blink of an eye, she had Warped, Thrown or Pulled every single spider into paste. Then she pointed at the remains, a look of absolute disgust on her face, and squealed in dainty outrage.

Sera and Bull howled with laughter.

“Oh, Maker, you were like,” Sera did a credible imitation of Helen's screams.

"Try not to shit your smalls, Boss!”

Even Solas couldn't help but get a just a little bit of a dig. “It is astonishing, Herald, how quickly your biotics recharge when you panic.”

Helen’s cheeks and the tips of her ears were bright pink. "I'd sell you all out for indoor plumbing right now. I hope you know that."

But her bright smile belied her words. She approached the nearest carcass, and gingerly scraped a bit of hair from a spider leg to scan later in the privacy of her tent.

The scans were beginning to seriously annoy Sera. Sera, on the other hand, was beginning to seriously annoy Solas.

Sera had been fostered by some human noble in Denerim, but she carried herself like street trash. Solas had all but written her off, until he saw her reaction to a rift.

Sera had fought as she always did—with juvenile insults and uncanny accuracy. But Solas had seen something flare to life in Sera when they were near the rift. It was if her spirit was trying to reach for the Fade.
After the rift was closed, he looked at Sera using his mage-sight. Sera was no mage, but she carried an echo of magic within her, a sensitivity that marked her as different, as exceptional.

Was there more potential in the modern elves than he had first been willing to accept? Had Felassan died for nothing?

Sera was doing everything she could to put his mind at ease on that front. She was rude and impatient. She drank to excess. Elven life was, “backwards and boring.” Most people were “stewpid.” Solas himself was “stewpid and boring.”

Lately, she had gotten into the habit of repeating everything he said in a mocking voice. It was infuriating.

Then there was the Iron Bull. He seemed intelligent enough—for a Qunari, anyway—but Bull was in service to a morally bankrupt religion. He had no qualms about being Ben-Hassrath.

Solas utterly despised the Qun for the way it demanded absolute obedience to its precepts, that it punished freedom of thought.

The wiser part of him knew it was pointless to argue about it, that in a few short years, all of these mortals would die, Qunari and Andrastrian alike. But he argued with Bull, anyway. Solas just could not help himself.

He could feel Helen's eyes on him during these discussions. She never said anything, not in defense of him or of Bull. And she never asked them to stop arguing. He could never tell what she was thinking, and it made him uncomfortable.

Still, it could hardly be a surprise that he preferred the Herald's company to Sera's and Bull's.

He rode next to her now, the giant spiders long behind them. She explained how the Systems Alliance Parliament had worked. Representatives were elected from the homeworld, as well as the colony planets. The Parliament itself was located on a space station, so that no one planet would have what she called a “home field advantage.”

He bombarded her with questions. How were elections held? Who was allowed to run for office? Who was allowed to vote? How did they enforce the laws they passed? What did the Prime Minister do?

Solas had not had such an interesting discussion outside of the Fade in ages. But as engaged as he was, he made sure that he did not stare at her for too long. He never allowed himself to look at her mouth, or her breasts, or her bottom.

When she was done talking about Parliament, she said, “My turn. I have more questions about the Fade.”

“I would be happy to answer them. Hopefully, we will have a quiet trip to the Fallow Mire.” The words had not been out of his mouth but a moment before they were set upon by a pack of feral dogs.

The rest of the day was like that. Dogs, bears, and bandits beset them at every turn. Their progress south slowed to a crawl.

It was a sign of things to come. Bandits attacked their camp that night.

It happened on Helen's watch. One moment, Solas had been in the Fade sifting through memories.
The next, he felt his wards violated, followed by Helen's piercing call to arms.

Solas and Bull bolted out of the tent to find three bandits trapped in a Singularity, while Sera was yanking an arrow out of the face of a fourth. A fifth bandit lay dead on the ground.

A sixth bandit ran up behind Sera, inexpertly holding a sword, when Helen appeared out of thin air right in front of him.

The bandit screamed in terror, dropping his sword. Helen grabbed him by the throat and slammed him onto the ground. After placing him in a stasis field, she sat on top of him. “Bull, Solas, kindly take care of this man's associates, please,” she said, indicating the singularity.

Solas froze the bandits, and Bull smashed their skulls. Sera prowled the perimeter of the camp, her bow at the ready. Solas began to pat down the bodies, looking for anything of interest.

The Herald released the stasis-field on her captive. “How many in your group? Are there more of you?” she demanded.

“Six!” a very young voice stammered out behind his faceplate of the helm. “There's only six of us.”

Helen pulled the helmet off, to reveal a very young, very terrified elf. “Child, how old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

Helen sighed, got off of the boy, and helped him stand up.

Solas found unsigned orders in the pocket of a dead bandit. He handed the crumpled paper to the Herald. She read it out loud:

"'The patrol pattern is not negotiable. Upon any encounter resulting in injuries, mark trail and withdraw to the villa. We must remain in fighting condition to apply appropriate force and keep refugees clear from the area.'"

“Well, your friends aren't in fighting condition any longer, are they? What's your name?”

“Revas.”

“Of course it is,” Helen said. “So, Revas, ever killed anyone before?”

“Maker, no!” he whispered, tears in his eyes. “I didn't want to kill anybody.”

“Then why take a job that asks you to kill people?”

“They never said anything about killing people,” he said. “They were in the alienage in Redcliffe, recruiting elves for night work. The money was good. They hired me a few weeks ago. Mostly, it's just been patrols after dark. This was my first raid.”

“And your last, at least with this group. Who do you work for?”

“The East Road Company. They're up in that big villa south of here.” It was the same group they had faced a few days earlier, the day they had met Mihris.

“Why are they here?”

“I don't know. Something to do with the Carta.”
“The Carta?” Solas said. “Are you sure?” If the Carta was involved, there was far more involved here than just mere banditry.

The boy nodded. “Yes, Hahren, I'm sure.”

Helen was reading the orders again. “So why change the patrol pattern now? Why not, 'mark trail and withdraw to the villa' like the orders state?”

Revas swallowed. “Because my patrol leader,” and he glanced over at one of the dead bandits, “wanted to make a name for himself. His orders were, 'Capture the Herald, kill her companions.'”

Sera snorted, finally putting her bow down. "Got it a bit backwards, din't ya? All your friends are dead, and the Herald captured you!

"She's got a point, kid," Bull said. Revas' eyes got even bigger when he saw the Qunari stand behind Helen.

“When is your patrol due to return?” Helen asked.

“Just before dawn.”

Helen glanced over at the bodies, then looked back at Revas. “I don't kill children, no matter how bad their judgment. Do your parents know where you are?’”

"My father died last year. My mother told me not to join up, but we're starving. At least with this job, I can send money home."

Helen slowly raised an eyebrow. “And have you been paid?”

"Only half of what they promised me."

“You should work for better people, kid,” Bull said.

“Could...could I come work for you?” Revas asked, hopefully.

Helen shook her head. "No. I don't kill children, but I don't hire them, either."

“I'm not a child!” he said, petulantly.

“The Herald is correct, da'lin. You are not of age,” Solas admonished.

"Hahren, please!” he pleaded at Solas. “You know what it's like in the alienage! No work, no way out. Besides, if I go back to Redcliffe, and East Road finds me there, they'll kill me! Or worse, they'll hurt my family!”

“By the time you get back to Redcliffe, they'll all be dead. Now here, take this,” Helen pressed a few coins into the palm of the young man's slender hand, “and go home to your mother. I am sure she is worried sick about you.”

The child looked down into his hand and nodded forlornly. He muttered his thanks and started to leave.

“Oi! Eedjit!” Sera yelled, as she ran over to him. They spoke in low voices. He left looking a bit happier.

“Offer him a job with the Jennies?” Helen said.
“Don’t be nosy, you,” Sera grinned.

They burned the bodies, broke camp and were gone before sunrise.

The next few days were a near-constant fight for their lives. The East Road Company were well equipped and gave no quarter. A rift in a cave had far stronger demons then they usually faced. And they could hardly go more than an hour without running into bears or packs of feral dogs.

At least wolves left them alone. Helen still wore the Token of the Packmaster that Solas had given her months ago.

Finally, they cleared the area enough to establish another Inquisition forward camp. As soon as Inquisition Scouts arrived and set up camp, the entire ground team collapsed into tents and took long naps, even though it was still morning.

They planned their next steps that night after supper. The Grand Forest Villa, currently acting as headquarters for the East Road Company, lay directly in their path south to the Fallow Mire.

One of the scouts had done a little reconnaissance. “The Villa isn't fortified,” she told them, “but they've added siege equipment. Two giant trebuchets right out there on the patios. A third under construction. Guards posted at the northern entrance. There's a score of them in the Villa itself at any given time. Mostly heavy weapons but some archers, as well.”

Helen decided they would attack the Villa before dawn the following morning, when the inhabitants were more likely to be asleep.

“I hope this goes quickly,” she said to Solas as she headed to bed, “Getting out of the Hinterlands is beginning to feel like a prison break.”

**

It did not go quickly.

They spent most of the morning fending off some of the largest bears any of them had ever seen. These bears had ridges all along their back, like a quillback, and were half-again as large as the other bears in the Hinterlands.

By the time their path to the compound was clear, the morning was gone. Instead of a frontal assault, Helen approached the Villa from the west along a ridge that gave them some cover. Bull and Sera kept watch while Solas and Helen crept onto an outcrop that had enough vegetation to provide them with some cover.

Helen and Solas looked out over the front of the compound—and fate finally gifted them with a small favor.

Feral dogs were attacking the bandits.
More bandits ran out of the Villa to aid their compatriots.

Helen and Solas quickly returned to Bull and Sera. The team scurried up the edge of the compound, following an animal trail that gave them both access and cover. Just as they got to the edge of the Villa, Helen said, “Wait for my signal,” and activated her tactical cloak.

The signal came in the form of a screaming, heavily armored bandit that sailed through the air and landed in front of them. He was likely dead as soon as he hit the ground but Bull smashed his skull in anyway.

Solas, Bull, and Sera sprinted through a trellised courtyard towards three confused and angry bandits. He couldn't see Helen, but he felt her barrier go over all of them. Two bandits fell backwards as if being pushed by an invisible hand.

Her voice, just above their heads on the trellis, called out, “Archers!” as three archers ran in from the east.

One of the archers swiftly pointed his arrow at the location of Helen's voice and let his arrow fly. It bounced off her barrier, but it also deactivated her cloak. She dropped off the trellis as another arrow flew her way.

Helen trapped the archers in a singularity field. Sera swiftly took them out, counting “one-two-three! All done!”

Solas and Bull had their hands full with one of the most massive humans Solas had ever seen. The man was as tall as Bull, and nearly as heavy. His high-quality armor had been enchanted to resist magic.

He swung his mace at Solas' head. Solas Fade-Stepped out of reach at the last second. Bull kicked the man while he was off balance, and sent him sprawling.

Bull followed up with an overhand swing of his own, but the bandit rolled out of the way and nimbly hopped back up onto his feet. Solas's fireball only made the bandit laugh.

Helen warped the bandit's armor. Bull's next swing cracked the armor open. Solas sent a surge of electrical energy into the man's body, stopping his heart.

The men that had fled the Villa to help fight off the dogs returned now in force, weapons drawn. Helen led the charge down the grand staircase and met them head-on.
None of these were as heavily armored as the bandit that Bull and Solas had struggled to kill. It did
not take long for the last man to fall.

Helen and Bull rushed to the front entrance to check for stragglers. None appeared. It was over.

Solas and Helen stripped the bodies of weapons, armor, and personal effects. All of them were male. Most were human, although an elf and two dwarves were in the group.

Before burning them, the Herald scanned each and every corpse. Solas asked her why.

"I am looking for information."

“About?”

“About your planet, your people. About why Thedas is the way it is.”

Not my people, but he did not say it. “What sort of information does your omnitool show you?”

“I am looking at,” and then she spouted off a few words in her own language, then shook her head a bit in frustration. “There is no translation in your language. I suppose the simplest explanation is that I am looking at these individuals' biology.”

“And what will that tell you?”

“I don't know yet. The more I learn about Thedas, the less I understand it,” she said, tapping the omnitool off. “Every time I get a new piece of the puzzle, I learn the puzzle is much larger than I thought.”

“That is often the path to wisdom,” Solas told her. “New knowledge brings new uncertainty.”

They burned the bodies to ash. Helen looked drained.

A search of the compound showed that young Revas had told them the truth. The East Road Company had been working for the Carta, which was conducting some kind of business in Valammar.

“What is Valammar?” Helen asked.

“It's a Dwarven thaig,” Bull said. “Sounds like the Carta is doing something they prefer to keep to themselves.”

The mercenaries had treated the Villa like an outdoor camp. There were few furnishings, beyond new desks in the quartermaster's office and the master bedroom. There were no beds, although a dozen or so filthy bedrolls were haphazardly stacked around the Villa. Helen scanned them, made a face and ordered them burned.

Sera found a few boxes of potions. Bull discovered a wine cellar that the bandits had not completely depleted. Solas located the larder, which stored as much poison as it did food.

Helen found running water, or the potential for it, anyway. Many of the pipes were broken or missing.

They also found several caches of weapons and armor. Working for the Carta came with some perks. A weapons rack in the quartermaster's office held dwarven weapons of extremely high quality, including a few unusual staves with twisting veins of lyrium embedded all along its length.
Solas picked one up and felt his connection the Fade dramatically increase. The lyrium inside of it gave off a faint echo of the Old Song.

He tested the staff for weight and balance. It was top-heavy, and lighter overall than he preferred. Those problems could be somewhat ameliorated with the addition of a blade or weight at the butt of the staff if need be.

Curious, he aimed a single fireball at a small boulder on the mountainside. The rock glowed red. Solas quickly launched an ice spell at it. The boulder shattered into gravel and rained down the slope.

Yes, this will do nicely. “We should keep these for the Inquisition's battlemages,” he said to the Herald. “They are far superior to anything Master Harrit can produce in Haven.”

“I can see that,” she replied, with a small smile.

He looked down his nose at her. “This amuses you.”

Her smile deepened. “Weapon upgrades are a source of universal happiness, Solas.”

“Yes. Well,” Solas sniffed, hiding his own smile as he pretended to inspect the head of the new lyrium staff. “I will check the ocularum.”

They worked throughout the afternoon. Helen stopped several times to point her omnitool at things. The trebuchets, the ocularum, the tower, correspondence from the desk in the master bedroom. She spent some time in the quartermaster's office to print up a few scrolls, and several long pages of text and pictures.

Towards evening, a dozen Inquisition scouts appeared to help set up a base camp. Ravens were sent.

Supper that night was more extravagant than they usually got on the road, as they cooked not only sausages, cabbages and cheese from the larder, but also fresh fish from the nearby pond.

When Helen saw Bull come up with the several bottles of wine and liquor, she immediately ordered the Corporal to have half of the scouts abstain so enough people were sober for the night watch rotation.

By the time supper had ended, the sober scouts were patrolling the compound, while the rest were getting quite drunk. Bull enjoyed the attentions of a human female who sat on his lap and tittered over his horns. A supremely inebriated Sera giggled into the neck of a dwarven girl.

Solas nursed a glass of the wine too sweet for his tastes, and wondered if he would be able to find a place quiet enough to fall asleep.

An elven scout, a skinny alienage woman who reeked of liquid courage, plopped herself next to Solas. “Hey, you. I'm Maisie.”

Solas kept his face and voice polite. “Hello, Maisie.”

She blinked at him. “And you are?”

“A member of the Herald's ground team.”

She playfully rolled her bloodshot eyes. “I know that, I was at the forward camp last night. D'ya
have a name?"

Solas sighed. “Solas.”

“See? ‘twasn't so hard, was it? So, Solas,” she tried to say his name seductively but it came out slurred.

Then, much faster than he would have thought possible, she slid onto his lap and placed her arms around his neck.

“Betcha hear this all the time, but you're handsome.” She gave him a drunken, sleepy smile.

Solas tried to lean away, so he wouldn't have to smell her breath, while also keeping his hands out to his sides, so as not to touch her, while also trying to find a way to politely reject her.

And then Helen, bless her, came to his rescue. ”Solas,” she called out from across the courtyard, “we need to set wards. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, Herald. Maisie, if you'll excuse me.” The girl got off his lap and swayed in place. Solas picked up his staff and stood, as well. Maisie's eyes slid back and forth between Solas and the Herald who was walking towards them.

“We should start at the northern entrance,” Helen said, all business.

“Agreed.”

As they left the courtyard, they heard Maisie yell at Sera accusingly, “You said he din't like shemlen!”

Solas cursed under his breath and risked a look at Helen. She did not look offended. Amused, definitely, but not offended.

“So?” Sera responded. “Doesn't mean he has to like you.”

Once they were out of earshot, Solas said gave a small sigh of relief, “Thank you for the intervention, Helen.”

“Worth it to see the look on your face when she sat on your lap. Although we really do need your wards. Half this lot is so piss drunk they’ll be worse than useless if we get ambushed.” They began to walk the perimeter.

"So tell me why your new staff is better," she said. They leisurely walked the perimeter as Solas set defensive wards, and discussed lyrium, mana and harmonization with the Fade.

By the time they made a full circuit around the property, the party seemed to be winding down.

“Here, come with me,” Helen said. She led them to the quartermaster's office, only to find that it was locked. Bull's booming laughter and the squeals of at least two women could be heard inside. One of them sounded like Maisie.

Helen sighed, and headed back towards the entrance to the Villa. "Dammit. I really wanted to get behind closed doors and scan your new staff. Maybe we can look at it once we're on the road. Would you be willing to let me scan while you heal my hand, or cast a spell? I want to see what magic looks under the spectrometer."

Solas found that he suddenly wanted to see what magic looked like under the spectrometer, too,
although he had never heard of one before.

“Yes, I would like that. Will you share your results with me?”

“Share them? Solas, you'll probably have to explain them. Of course, I'll share.”

They had wandered to the wooden bridge that gave passage over the pond. Helen sat down and began unbuckling her boots. Solas sat on her left. He removed his both of his footwraps with a single swipe of a spell.

“Showoff,” she grinned. She pulled off her first boot and began unbuckling the second.

Solas plunged his feet into the water. "I seem to recall someone invisibly running across a trellis today."

Helen chuckled as she pulled off the remaining boot and eased her feet into the pond. She gave a grateful sigh. “That was not showing off. That was using the terrain to the best tactical advantage.”

They sat in comfortable silence. He made waves with his feet and watched the lily pads move. Helen sat back on her hands and looked up into the night sky. Solas allowed himself this moment of peace.

“Solas?”

“Yes?”

“What happens on Thedas when somebody dies?”

He looked over at her, confusion knitting his brows. “What do you mean?”

Helen was still looking at the night sky. “When someone dies, what happens to their soul?”

“That depends on the person who has died.”

“Does it?” She looked at him. “Then I will be more specific. If I die on Thedas, will I go to the Fade?”

Her eyes were bright and serious. This was no idle question. "All souls pass through the Fade when they die. For most, it is a fleeting journey on their way to another place."

"Another place?"

“Nobody is certain what that might be. Every religion has its own ideas and beliefs.”

“Do souls ever get stuck in the Fade?”

“Rarely, but it does happen. Helen, why are you asking these questions?”

She hesitated before saying, “You're the Inquisition's expert on the Fade. I expect you'll learn about this soon enough, anyway, but this needs to stay between us for now.”

“Of course.”

A heavy sigh. “The omnitool recorded the explosion at the Conclave, and my escape from the Fade.”
Solas gaped at her. “All of it?”

“All of it.”

Solas’ mind began to sort through various scenarios, as he tried to sift through every possible consequence. Keeping his tone calm, he said, “And what did it show?”

“Everything from the moment I entered the Conclave to the moment Leliana took my omnitool. Remember when I stayed behind in the ruin last week? I watched it, well parts of it, anyway. I’ve been wanting to talk about it with you for days, but we’ve had no opportunity.”

Solas listened with a mask of patience as Helen told him how she had entered the Temple of Sacred Ashes, freezing, delirious, and dying from radiation poisoning. She briefly described interrupting Corypheus' ritual, reaching for the orb and inheriting the anchor. She told him how Justinia had led her out of the Fade.

*The orb. She's seen the orb. The advisors will see the orb.*

Would any of them recognize it as Elvhen?

“Justinia didn't know me,” Helen was saying, sorrow in her voice. “All she knew was that I was some foreigner responsible for the explosion. Yet she led me to safety and sacrificed her own life for mine.”

Solas forced himself back to the present. “What do you mean, 'you were responsible for the explosion'?”

Helen looked at him incredulously. “Solas, one of the first things we learn in the Alliance is to never touch strange technology or contraband until we know what it is! This is something I have had ingrained into me for my entire career. 'Scan it first!' 'Don't touch the tech!' 'You don't know what you don't know!'

“I landed on a strange planet, and what did I do when the first piece of tech came bouncing my way?” She shook her head in disgust. “I reached for it, like some brand new recruit who didn't know one end of her weapon from the other.”

Solas was almost as thrown by Helen referring to his orb as “tech” as he was by her misconception that she was somehow at fault for this.

She flexed her left hand into a fist. “Guess I'm paying for it now. I just wish all of Thedas didn't have to pay for it, too.”

“No.” He picked up her left hand and, almost by habit, sent a healing spell into it. “Helen, what happened at the Conclave was not your fault.”

“I detonated a bomb. I might not have meant to, but I did.”

There was no way for him to reassure her without revealing how much he knew. He also wanted to see if there was any clue about the orb on the omnitool. “What looked like technology to you sounds like magic to me. Show me the recording tomorrow, once the quartermaster's office is unoccupied.”

“I would like that, assuming I can stop being the Herald for a few hours.”

“If you run out of time, perhaps we can look at it on the road.”
Helen shook her head. “No. I am not comfortable with Bull seeing any of this yet, at least not without the advisors' input. This isn't about the omnitool. This is about Thedas. This is magic and religion and war. I like Bull a great deal on a personal level, but his allegiance isn't to me. It's to his government.”

Maybe his arguments with Bull had not been a complete waste of time, after all, not if Helen was listening more closely than he'd realized. “I see your point.”

They sat there for a while in silence, Solas' inner calm now long gone, as he tried to map out all possible paths to recovering the orb.

"Solas?” she said quietly, as she gently squeezed his hand. He had not realized he was still holding onto hers. “Do you think I will survive closing the Breach? Tell me true.”

Helen wasn't worried about the orb. Why would she? To her, the orb was just one more thing in a series of events that was leading to her own death, possibly in just a few weeks.

He held onto her hand a bit tighter. “I would be lying if I said I was not worried. Your body does not react well to the mark.”

“No. It certainly doesn't.”

Solas did not know how to respond to that, so he simply held her hand as they dangled their feet in the water.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you, as always, to my incredibly patient betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. I have been spending a great deal of time researching the science for upcoming chapters, and my betas have been willing to read draft after draft.

Because questions about my posting schedule came up so much in the comments, I will go ahead and address this here, as well. Technically, I do not have a posting schedule. What I have instead is a system; I will not post a chapter until the next three are at least drafted and in various stages of beta. This process allows me to make changes to setting or plot or what-have-you, without needing to change something I have already posted.

There is no render this chapter, as I had screenshots aplenty. However, I've seen the ones that ProcrastiKate is working on for Chapters 30 and 31. You won't be disappointed!!

And finally, thank you, all of you, so much for leaving all of your comments and reviews and kudos. I am so incredibly grateful to all of you for sticking with Helen on her journey.
Chapter thirty

Chapter Summary

What DID happen in Haven when Cullen found out Leliana had the omnitool?

Chapter thirty

three weeks earlier, in Haven

Cullen left the healer's tent and headed to Cecelia's quarters.

She bunked in a small cabin with several other single women who worked in Haven. He knocked on the door. It was opened by one of Flissa's barmaids.

The barmaid's eyes went wide with delight when she saw him. "Commander Rutherford! Oh my goodness!" She struck a pose that showed off her cleavage to its best advantage. "How can I help you?"

"Your friend Cecelia is sick, and I need to retrieve her things. May I come in, please?"

Her face fell. "Oh. Sure. Cot's over there."

Cullen thanked her and stepped into the cabin. He went to the cot the girl had pointed at and looked underneath it. There, pushed up against the baseboard, was a linen laundry sack.

Cullen grabbed it, stood up and opened the bag. Inside it was a pair of pants and a long-sleeved shirt so filthy he could not tell what the original color had once been.

"So, you and Cecelia, eh? She's got a thing for Templars, don't she."

"What?" Cullen turned around to stare at the young woman. "Maker, no. Not me and Cecelia."

"Oh!" The smile reappeared at full strength. "Well! Glad to hear it! So, um, are you busy later?"

"I am afraid that all of my spare time is taken up preparing the Inquisition's forces and dealing with administrative matters." He'd said it so often since arriving in Haven that it had become almost rote to him by now. And there was just no way to politely tell a girl that sex would only make his craving for lyrium worse.

"Oh, I won't take up much of your time, Commander," she said. Cullen gave her a tight, polite smile that did not reach his eyes, and left in a hurry.

He did not go immediately to Leliana and confront her with the physical proof that she'd been lying about the Herald's belongings. Instead, Cullen went to Josephine and did what little brothers had done since the dawn of time.

He tattled.

Oh, he would never admit to it, of course. He was, "bringing a grave security matter" to the
attention of the Ambassador. He showed her the Herald's clothing and explained what had happened. He delivered his information in a clipped, military tone. He kept a frown on his face.

None of which changed the fact that he was tattling on Leliana.

Josephine was, of course, indignant that Leliana would do such a thing. She sent for the spymaster and tore into her.

“I cannot believe you, Leliana! Helen has done everything we have ever asked her to do. *Everything!* The only two things she has ever asked for are the whereabouts of her ship and her bracelet! You have made liars out of us all!”

Leliana was unapologetic about her actions. “The Herald kept telling us that her bracelet was a tool, that it was special. For all I knew, it caused the Breach! I sent it away to have it tested.”

“Tested?” Cullen asked, “Tested by whom?”

“To a dwarven arcanist I once knew.”

“Wait. Dagna?” Cullen was aghast. “You sent it to Dagna?”

“Oh, that's right,” Leliana said. “I forgot you would have known her at the Circle of Ferelden.”

“Of course, I knew her! She blew up the kitchens because she 'wanted to see what happened' when she added lyrium to biscuits!”

“And that research eventually led to a lyrium formula that is more stable in the field! She is highly qualified to inspect unknown magical artifacts!”

Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. “*Fine.* What did she find?”

“Nothing,” Leliana said. “She said it isn't magical, it isn't enchanted, and she could not get it to respond in any way. It seemed completely inert. None of which matters. It's the only leverage we have over the Herald.”

“Leverage for what?” Cullen asked.

Leliana looked at him like he was an idiot. “Leverage exists for its own sake, Cullen.”

They argued for hours. Well, Josie and Leliana argued. Cullen sat in a chair and leaned back against the wall. Mostly he kept his mouth shut, although he did interject with facts Leliana found inconvenient, like, “Solas knows. He'll tell the Herald if you don't.” And, “What if she threatens to leave *unless* you give it to her?”
Leliana finally agreed to give it back but became very cagey about when. Her suggested deadlines gave her loads of time to “misplace” the bracelet.

Josie finally demanded that Leliana immediately turn the bracelet over to Solas, who was leaving in a few days to meet the Herald.

“I'll take it to Solas,” Cullen offered. “I need to speak with him anyway.”

Leliana finally sighed in defeat, and said, “If this blows up in our faces, I'm blaming the two of
you.” She reached into a hidden pocket and handed Cullen a thin, rigid bracelet. He nodded once and headed towards Solas’ quarters.

Leliana’s furious reaction when she’d learned Solas had left for the Hinterlands told Cullen everything he needed to know about her intentions.

After that, he didn't think about it again. Why would he? He was up to his eyeballs in training, reports, and withdrawal symptoms.

Cassandra returned with the Chargers. Cullen spoke at length with Cremesius Aclassi. Krem seemed all right—for a Tevinter, anyway—and the Chargers were well-trained, if very, ah, colorful.

The Herald's first letter to the advisors after she received her omnitool was not what he expected. She was angry with Leliana, which was not exactly a shock. But passages like,

"In utero exposure to element zero is exceedingly dangerous. Biotic abilities such as mine are rare. Stillbirths, brain tumors, cancers and other congenital disabilities are far more common,”

made him uncomfortable. “Element zero.” “Biotic abilities.” “Congenital disabilities.” Even though the letter was in the Common, nobody else talked like that. It was strange. She was strange.

Her next correspondence was even more bizarre. When Leliana first showed it to him and Josephine, Cullen thought somebody had ripped a page from a book. It was *printed*, not handwritten. Then he started reading.

Advisors,

We have cleared the area east of the Crossroads of mercenaries. This group was both well-armed and well-organized. I found a note on one of the bodies. I include a copy with this missive.

As you can see, my omnitool still works. Having it back will make correspondence much easier on all of us.

Sincerely,

H. Trevelyan

He re-read the letter again, this time looking at the print. Was this normal for her people, to correspond like this?

Over the next several days, more of these printed letters arrived, noting the ground team's progress through the Hinterlands.

Advisors,

We have located Warden Blackwall. He had little information about the Wardens. However, he should be an asset to the Inquisition, both on the ground and in training. He is traveling to Haven now and will present himself to the spymaster when he arrives.

The ground team is pressing south, but you should know that we have encountered heavy resistance by mercenaries. Wild dogs and bears also seem to have taken a personal dislike to us. Our progress has been slowed as a result. I will continue to send word as I am able.

Sincerely,
H. Trevelyan

PS—Why did nobody warn me about the giant spiders?

**

Herald,

If you'll recall, I gave you a book.

In fact, I gave you two.

Welcome to Thedas,

C. Rutherford

**

Advisors.

We were ambushed last night by mercs. No injuries on the ground team. I interrogated one of our attackers, a 15-year-old named “Revas,” from the Redcliffe alienage. He informed us as follows:

The mercenaries call themselves the East Road Company. They have been recruiting elves for night work. Their objective is to keep the area clear from both refugees and Inquisition forces. They use Grand Forest Villa as their base. And he thinks they are working for the Carta.

I sent the boy back home to his mother, along with some coin. (His employers had not paid what they had promised. Shocking, I know, that bandits would act so dishonorably.)

His former co-workers perished during the attack.

Sincerely,

H. Trevelyan

“I should be with them,” Cassandra said.

“I am sure the Iron Bull is holding his own, Cass. He is a mercenary himself, after all,” Leliana said. “I will have my agents in the Redcliffe alienage look into the East Road Company, and let the elves know that they don't pay as promised. And I'll talk to Varric about this lead on the Carta.”

The advisors moved on to other matters. When Josie and Leliana began discussing the Ambassador's efforts with nobility, Cullen shut the entire discussion out completely. He unrolled the Herald's scroll and read it again.

It was printed in small, neat type. She mostly wrote in a formal, military style, but there would be an occasional flash of dry humor. It made his last letter to her seem a bit bratty by comparison.

Still, who referred to dead bandits as “co-workers?”

“Cullen.” Cassandra's voice tore his attention away from the Herald's letter. Josephine and Leliana had left. The door to the War Room was open.

The meeting had ended and he had not noticed. He wondered how long Cassandra had been trying
to get his attention, but he was afraid to ask. *Lyrium. Lyrium would fix this.*

“We will go have supper now,” Cassandra ordered.

He followed her out of the Chantry and tried to push away the temptation to use lyrium.

**

Warden Blackwall arrived in Haven. He and Leliana spoke privately for quite some time.

At the next advisor meeting, Leliana told them that Blackwall had no information about the Wardens but that she wanted him to stay, “even if he is not what we expected. He is a good man, and he has experience we need.”

Cullen located Blackwall the following morning and asked if he was willing to help with training. “Just put me where you need me, Commander,” was his response.

As they walked towards the training yard, Blackwall said, “So, that woman I met, the one with the white hair. *That’s* the Herald of Andraste?”

“Yes,” Cullen frowned. “I thought you met her in the Hinterlands.”

“I did,” he said, “but she never said she was the Herald. I didn't make the connection until yesterday when I was speaking with Sister Nightingale.”

“The Herald is not Andrastrian,” Cullen said. “She doesn't believe she's the Herald of anything.”

“Does she really tell people she's from another world?”

Cullen sighed. *It still sounds so ridiculous.* “Yes.”

“And...they believe her?”

Cullen wasn't sure he liked Blackwall. “Does it matter? She has the mark on her hand. She can close rifts.”

“Of course it matters! The Inquisition says she's the Herald of Andraste. She says she not. You people are sending that slip of a girl to close rifts and fight demons, and Maker knows what all else.”

“Don't let her appearance fool you,” Cullen said. “Whatever else she is, the Herald was a military officer and a combat veteran long before she joined the Inquisition.”

“I thought she was a mage.”

Cullen sighed again. “It's a long story.”

They had arrived at the training yard. Cullen brought the sword-and-shield recruits over to observe the sparring with him and Blackwall.

Blackwall fought like a chevalier, relying on precision and timing instead of strength. “Watch the Warden's footwork,” Cullen ordered the recruits. “His feet always know where my sword is going to be.”

When they were finished sparring, Cullen assigned the most promising soldiers to Blackwall for more advanced training. As long as the man was in Haven, they might as well use his expertise.
Advisors,

We have taken the Grand Forest Villa from the East Road Company. Its members and leader are dead.

Correspondence (attached) confirms they were under contract with the Carta. A key to the Valammar thaig has been recovered. Please advise if I should send the key to Haven.

There is siege equipment here: two complete trebuchets, and one still under construction.
I have scanned the trebuchet schematics for Commander Rutherford's information. Those will be sent under separate cover.

The Villa has a non-functional plumbing system.

In my opinion, the Villa is not defensible as a military installation. Granted, the view is lovely but the merc leader was an idiot to set up here. Trebuchets are useless if a small strike team can sneak in through the gardens.

Recommendations: fix the plumbing, block off access to the west side of the property, and use the Villa as a resupply or medical station.

Sincerely,

H. Trevelyan

The picture was incredible, more accurate than any drawing.

The schematics arrived a few days later. The Herald had also sent a document called, “The physics of catapults: Calculating acceleration, trajectory, and force using Newtonian mechanics.” It set forth Newton's First, Second and Third laws, and explained how to calibrate a catapult to get the projectile where it needed to be.

He did not know who this Sir Issac Newton was, but his laws were elegant, and the accompanying formulas practical. Cullen could use them right away on the siege equipment they were building here in Haven.

He began spending what little free time he had on the trebuchets. Calculating trajectories and working with his hands soothed him in a way nothing else had since he'd stopped taking lyrium. It felt like scratching an itch he had never been able to reach.

Soon enough, his duties would call, and he would be back on to barking orders, signing papers and teaching the recruits how not to fall on their swords. But for whatever small amount of time he was able to devote to calibrating the trebuchets, the lyrium did not call to him.

Maybe, he thought, after we close the Breach, after the war is over, maybe there's a way out for me after all. Oh, Maker. Please.

Please.

A/N: Thank you, as always, to my incredibly patient betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. Thank you, as well, to the fantastic render that ProcrastiKate did, of Cullen watching Leliana and Josephine argue. “Half-Life” is a group effort.

And finally, thank you, all of you, so much for leaving all of your comments and reviews and kudos. I am so incredibly grateful to all of you for sticking with Helen on her journey.
Chapter thirty-one

Chapter Summary

Helen finally gets out of the Hinterlands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Helen did not get to show the vid to Solas the next day. Instead, the rising sun revealed empty bottles, scattered litter, and puddles of piss baking into the flagstones.

Helen roused Sera, Bull, and every single hungover scout and bellowed her orders in the bright, bright sunshine. Most of the scouts winced and looked a little green, but none dared argue with her. Bull looked at her approvingly.

Only Sera tried to get out of it. “Why can't Solas just magic it all away?” she whined.

“Because Solas didn't make the mess.”

Sera grabbed a bucket and rags like everybody else but muttered under her breath about Helen being stupid and boring. Finally, she said, loud enough for everybody to hear, "Ugh, gross! This piss is all dried up!"

Her dwarven companion from the night before said, “Then you shouldn't have peed there, Sera. I told you not to, but you wanted to show everybody your bottom.”

"Oh yeah," Sera cackled. "Forgot about that." She continued to complain about the mess, but her ire was no longer directed at Helen.

Bull got his own clean-up duty—the Quartermaster's office—but not before Helen closed the door and did a quick scan of the bodily fluids. The room reeked of stale booze and sex. She left as soon as the scans were complete.

Taking the scans made her a bit uncomfortable; she felt it was toeing over an ethical line. Sera had allowed Helen to scan her hair. The dead mercs Helen had scanned yesterday had no consent left to give.

Bull and his partners, however, had not consented to Helen doing anything with their bodily fluids.

On the other hand, they'd left generous deposits of their DNA on the desk, the weapons rack, the wall and on top of the filing cabinet. At worst, it was abandoned property. At best, they wanted to share.

She wondered if Solas would be willing to let her scan him. The omnitool didn't require fluids or hair. That's just what people tended to leave behind. She could scan his body directly, as she had with the dead mercs, assuming he agreed to it. As for getting bodily fluids from him...
Solas, be a dear and wank off into this cup.

Helen had to hide a terrible case of the giggles for a few minutes until a scout handed her a report from Corporal Vale. She went back to work.

They left the Villa in the early afternoon. It would take the rest of the day to travel up the switchback that took them over the mountain and out of the Hinterlands. As they saddled up their horses, Bull's companions from the night before came over to say their farewells. Bull gathered them in his arms and said, in Qunlat, "I enjoyed seeing my ejaculate on your breasts. In my language, that means, 'You have both given me deep joy.'"

Solas leaned over to Helen and murmured, “In fairness, Bull's translation might not be accurate, but it is certainly true.”

“I don't doubt it,” Helen replied. “I saw the quartermaster's office.” Solas let out a quiet chuckle. Helen filed away the fact that Solas spoke Qunlat.

Solas and Mor'Lanun led the party up the switchback. Helen brought up the rear, mostly to make sure that Sera (who still bitched about her hangover) didn't fall too far behind.

By the time they reached the top of the mountain pass, it was late afternoon. They only had a couple of hours of light left. Helen assumed Solas would be in a hurry to find a suitable place to camp for the night.

Instead, he lingered, looking over the Hinterlands.
"Solas." She said it quietly as if they were sitting next to each other. His ear twitched in her
direction just before he turned his head and looked at her. He glanced at Bull and Sera, who had ridden well past Helen.

He swung his horse around and joined her. “Apologies.”

"None necessary," she said. Solas nodded once, and they continued their journey south.

**

Compared to fighting their way out of the Hinterlands, the trip to the Fallow Mire felt like an actual holiday.

Helen wanted to get to the captured Inquisition soldiers quickly, but the fact was, the ground team needed a breather. Sera was tough, but she was city-tough. This sort of extended march through the wilderness was utterly foreign to her. And even with their military backgrounds, Solas and Bull looked worn out, dark circles beginning to form under their eyes.

So, Helen set a moderate pace. They set up camp an hour earlier than before and got up an hour later in the morning. Helen let them linger a bit over lunch. Bull had swiped a few bottles of rum from the Villa before they left, which he shared with Sera (Helen and Solas mostly abstained).

Few people lived in the southern riverlands of Ferelden, which meant no bandits. The wildlife here left them alone. They only skirmished when they came across a Fade rift, and for a couple of days, they didn't come across any at all.

It was a much-needed change.

Helen took advantage of the break to learn some new combat moves—like having Bull throw her across the battlefield.

Bull's original idea of running into combat with Helen perched on his horns or shoulders did not work. He couldn't turn his head quickly, which left his blind side exposed.

Sera's suggestion—having Helen make a running jump into Bull's hand so he could throw her like a shot-put—worked much better. Adding her own biotic Push to the kinetic energy of Bull's throw allowed her to go even farther and higher.

It was not a practical move. Bull had to see her, which meant she couldn't use her tactical cloak. Her velocity was hard to predict. It was unquestionably dangerous for them both.

But god help her, it was fun. They practiced every day after lunch. Sera whooped and hollered out suggestions (“Do a flip!”) while Solas vibrated with disapproval.

So she asked him to teach her how to Fade Step. That mollified him a little bit.

She couldn't do an actual Fade-Step, of course. The way Solas explained it, waves of Fade energy pushed him forward. Helen tried to create a biotic field behind her to Push her forward but had better luck focusing on a point in the distance and Pulling herself towards it.

At night, Helen continued to run scans. It was slow going. She only used the omnitool for a short while each night, because otherwise, Sera couldn't get to sleep. Still, even with her limited time, she was able to learn a few things.

Nearly all flora and fauna were Milky Way species, either directly descended or genetically modified. (Personally, she wanted to go back in time to sucker punch the asshole that made
Dwarves showed just as much genetic modification as elves, perhaps even more so. Thicker bones. Shorter, broader bodies. Slightly larger brains and nasal passages. Like the elves, it had all taken place around 9500 years ago.

Every human she had scanned was a descendant of the Andromeda Initiative. A couple of them had some elven traits—namely, an enhanced nervous system—but the traits were recessive. Three humans, otherwise unrelated, shared an ancestor from around 4000 years ago. Helen wasn't sure what that meant, but it was something to file away for future reference.

Bull's DNA was a clusterfuck.

The elven and dwarven genomes might have been tweaked in a lab, but they were still *homo sapiens sapiens*. Elves and dwarves were, at their most fundamental level, human in every respect.

The Qunari were modified *elves*, and even the term “modified” was not accurate. Entire portions of the DNA had been replaced with the DNA of a species the omnitool could only identify as, "Archosauria, unknown variant." She had to look up "Archosauria" in the omnitool's encyclopedia because damned if she knew what it was.

*Archosauria* was a subclass of reptiles—specifically, birds and crocodiles. Somebody, on a planet with almost no advanced tech, had managed to marry reptilian DNA into the elven genome less than 2000 years ago. Nor was it elegantly done. It did not have the precision of the tweaked genomes of elves and dwarves. This looked more like the sort of Frankenstein's-lab horror story that the Sudham-Wolcott Genetic Heritage Act had been passed to prevent.

When they had time—if they had time—Helen wanted to ask Bull about the history of the Qunari.

For now, though, she added “Qunari DNA” to the growing list of things she'd learned about Thedas which left her with more questions than answers.

**

The night before they were to arrive at the forward camp in the Fallow Mire, Sera pointed at Helen's wrist and asked, “Are you gonna stare at that stupid thing again tonight?”

“Yes,” Helen said.

“Please, not tonight!” Sera whined. “I'm *sooo* tired.”

“You are hungover, Sera,” Solas pointed out, less than helpfully. “That is hardly the Herald's fault.”

Sera gave him a rude hand gesture before turning back to Helen. “Can't you just, like, I dunno, take a break from that thing?”

Helen started to say, *of course, Sera*, when Bull interjected, “You can bunk with me, Boss. I don't care if you look at it.”

“Uuugh, *no!* I'm not sharing a tent with *Solas*.”

“That is correct, Sera. You are *not* sharing with me,” Solas sniffed. “You can share with Bull, assuming, of course, that the Herald agrees.”
“It’s all right with me.”

After supper, Helen stripped down to her underarmor in the tent she now shared with Solas. As she washed her face and cleaned her teeth, Solas sat on his bedroll and wrote in his journal. He wore only threadbare leggings and his jawbone necklace, his gloriously sculpted chest on full display.

_Goddamn, Solas. What else are you hiding under those raggedy-ass clothes?_

Her mind traitorously answered _DNA samples._ She started snickering around her makeshift toothbrush.

“What amuses you, _da’len_?” Solas asked without looking up from his journal.

Helen pulled the stick and flannel out of her mouth and gestured at his naked torso. "I was just feeling a bit sorry for poor Maisie, is all."

His lips twitched as he kept his gaze on the page. “Maisie seemed to find ample consolation in the company of another.”

“Yes. _Ample._ An apt description, after what I found in the quartermaster's office. Still, you were her first choice. And now here you are,” Helen teased, as she sat down on her own bedroll, “half-naked in a tent with one of those _shemlen_ you don't even like.”

“I can put on more clothing if this makes you uncomfortable,” he suggested, as he started to dip his quill into the bottle of ink.

“Good lord, no. I ran far too many ground missions for the Alliance to have any sense of modesty left. You're all lucky I don't strip naked every night and bathe in full view.”

Solas paused his writing, just as Helen remembered that this was the same guy who had once scolded her for wanting to bathe in a stream. He did not look at her as he put his quill, ink, and journal back into his travel pack. She was beginning to worry she'd offended him when he said, "You mentioned a few nights ago that you wanted to scan your hand as I healed it."

_That's right, I did._

She turned on her omnitool, activated the spectrometer app, and held her left hand out. Solas sent a wave of warm healing energy into her hand. The constant ache vanished.

The spectrometer told her that Solas was bathing her hand in a range of infrared light. “How are you changing the wavelength to infrared?” she asked him.

“I am not certain what you mean, exactly. I focus the raw energy of the Fade into healing energy. What do you see?”

“Technically, I don’t _see_ anything. It's beyond the visible spectrum, at least for me. Here, I'll show you.”

She used the spectrometer’s prism function to cast a small dispersion rainbow, about seven inches long, onto the top of Solas' bedroll. “Point to the first and last colors visible to you.”

Solas placed one fingertip at the end of the red color band and the other an inch beyond the end of the violet color band.

“Interesting,” Helen said. Keeping the omnitool up with her right hand, she stretched over Solas'
bedroll with her left and pointed to the end of the violet band. “Humans only see to there. Can all elves see in ultraviolet?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

Helen touched the area of the bedroll past the red band. “There’s a range of light here called infrared. The naked eye cannot see it, but the spectrometer can”.

Helen closed the prism function and sat back down on her bedroll. She replayed the scan of Solas healing her hand, using the infrared filter. It looked like water flowing through the cracks of a sponge.

Solas was transfixed. “Tell me what this looks like to you,” he said.

“I see infrared energy. This makes sense to me because infrared was used in a lot of medical technology back home. How do you change Fade energy into healing energy?”

“With my will. The Fade responds to intent. If I intend to heal your injury, you will heal. If I intend to cause you injury, you will be injured.”

“So, when you heal a cut, how does that happen?”

Solas opened his mouth to answer, then closed it and frowned. Then he had to think about it. “I suppose the simplest explanation is that I tell the tissues to repair themselves and regenerate new tissue when necessary.”

Helen rewound, zoomed into the cellular level of her and watched it again. Solas was not merely reducing inflammation. He was repairing some of the cellular damage that the ionization from the mark was causing.

Helen replayed it in slow motion. Solas, who had been sitting to her left, placed his right hand behind her to better lean over and see the screen.

“Can any mage do this?” she asked him.

“In theory. Most mages have one or two areas of magic that interest them more than others. It is easier to focus your will when the subject already interests you.” His voice was lower than usual, his chin almost touching her shoulder.

Helen turned her head to glance at Solas. His intense gaze met hers. For a very confusing moment, Helen was sure he was about to kiss her.
Then his eyes slid to her ear. He sat back. "It is getting late, falon. Perhaps we should continue this discussion another time."

She nodded and tapped off the omnitool. Solas extinguished his candle. They both settled into their bedrolls.

Helen felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. A physical relationship held little appeal to her,
at least at the moment. Given the choice between sex with Solas and a hot bath, she'd ask Solas to kindly hand her the soap.

On the other hand, it hurt to see such a thoughtful man beholden to his own bigotry. Fair or not, she expected better from him.

*It doesn't matter, remember? Close the Breach. Worry about Solas' bigotry if you survive. Until then, don't cry, don't bitch, don't blame."

Helen took a deep, cleansing breath, and settled into sleep. Just as she drifted off, Solas said quietly, “Do you remember what we discussed the other night? About your recording of the Conclave?”

“Sure.”

“I know a way for you to share it with me in a manner that would maintain your concerns about privacy.”

“Oh?”

“While we sleep, I could meet you in the Fade. You could show it to me there. We could discuss anything you like, and nobody in the waking world would overhear.”

Logically, it was a good idea, but the very thought of Solas poking around in her brain made her deeply uncomfortable. "Let me think about it."

"Take whatever time you need, falon. Consider it a standing offer.”

“I will. On nydhea, Solas.”

"On nydhea, Helen.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to my eternally patient and fantastic betas for their feedback. I cannot emphasize enough just how much they both help "Half-Life" come together.

I also need to thank Mikan, polarbaronness, and quarkoniumglowbug for their help with some of the biology. Much of what they taught me will be used in future chapters but this chapter was the first time I really had to look well beyond the canon for information. If I've gotten anything about the science wrong, it's my fault, not theirs. (Although Mikan, polarbaronness, and quarkoniumglowbug, if I DID get anything wrong, do me a solid and tell me in private? Pretty please?)
And we have another beautifully fantastic render from ProcrastiKate! I think she has been wanting this chapter to go up as much as I have. She can be found at http://annatrocity.tumblr.com/ It also means there is a new #shirtless tag. XD

I am traveling for the next couple of weeks, so I won't be posting again until December. I will try and reply to any comments but it may be kind of hit and miss. Finally, I want to thank everybody who has left kudos, reviews, and comments. Thank you all so much for continuing to follow Helen on her journey.
Chapter thirty-two

Chapter Summary

Helen and crew learn the charms of the Fallow Mire.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirty-two

Helen had learned long ago to keep a certain distance between herself and death. Any profession that saw much of death required it. Cops, doctors, soldiers—none of them could afford to fall apart at the sight of dead bodies.

Helen had always coped by using categories or labels. “Return to next-of-kin.” “Throw out with the trash.” “Evidence.” Now she had a new, far more horrid, category for the dead.

“Shock troops.”

At least Scout Harding had warned them about the undead. It gave Helen just enough time to adjust that she did not completely freak out when the first few corpses—putrid, slimy, and reeking of bad meat—staggered towards them, weapons in hand.

Corpses felt no pain, or fear, or remorse. They only stopped attacking when the body itself had been utterly destroyed.

Helen struggled not to vomit. The bodies had been pickling in a peat bog long enough to discolor the skin and lose some mass, but not long enough to be fully preserved.

After they defeated the corpses, Helen pointed at the chunks of flesh and bone that lay scattered around them. “How does a dead body do this?” she demanded.

Solas kicked into lecture mode. "In places where the Veil is thin, spirits press through, hoping to experience life in the waking world. They possess the newly dead and the dying, shackling them to the wrong side of the Veil. Most will go insane, and animate the corpse to kill any life form they encounter."

“He means demons,” Bull said shortly, glaring at Solas.

"The dead and the dying, do they know they are being possessed?” Helen asked as she scanned the remains of the bodies. "Are their souls trapped inside their bodies with the spirit?"

Solas had to think about it for a moment before deciding that no, likely not.

It was an awful day. A storm system had parked itself over the southern marshlands, keeping the area in a perpetual state of gloom.

If they disturbed the water, corpses attacked. If they searched an abandoned cottage, corpses attacked. If they just walked down the crappy roads, corpses attacked. Helen scanned what remains
when she could, telling the VI to sequence DNA whenever possible.

They found a beacon, just off of the main road. Helen assumed it was nothing more than a local landmark but of course, Solas lit the Veilfire sconce without bothering to tell anybody he planned to do it. And of course, that triggered an attack of corpses led by a terror demon.

“Goddammit, Solas!” she yelled, as she hastily raised a barrier over everybody. It was a long, exhausting fight. The terror demon seemed especially keen on Helen, knocking her off her feet a few times.

When it was over, Helen strode over to Solas and wordlessly glared up at him. She must have looked a fright because his eyes slightly widened when he saw her.

“Apologies, everybody, I did not anticipate that response,” he said hastily. Then he looked around. “On the other hand, lighting the beacon does seem to have cleared the area of corpses. If there are other beacons like this, it might make travel easier.”

“Warn us first next time,” Helen hissed before storming off. Solas lingered a moment to look at a rune with the Veilfire before joining them.

They trudged through undead-infested swampland for several more hours. Wraiths tended to pop into existence and harass them. Ordinarily, she would have asked Solas why they did, but today, Helen couldn’t give a shit. She just wanted to rescue the Inquisition soldiers and get the fuck out of Dodge.

They found another beacon. Solas did give warning before lighting the Veilfire torch. It resulted in a shorter, more manageable fight.

When it was over, Solas asked Helen to hold the Veilfire torch and look at the rune. Did she hear anything? Did she feel anything? Did she want to scan it at all?

No. She didn't.

Solas looked a little disappointed, and said, “This is a unique opportunity to learn something new about the Veil.”

It took all of her willpower not to throw the torch at his shiny little head. What the hell was wrong with him? Had he forgotten that they were on a rescue mission? Did he not notice the swamp of horrors that surrounded them? Did it never occur to him that some moments were not appropriate for his stupid little lectures about the stupid fucking Fade?

When they found a reasonably dry alcove, Helen called a halt for the night. Sera tossed her bedroll into Bull's tent, which made Solas frown at Helen as if she'd decided for them.

Helen was too tired and sad to argue over sleeping arrangements. Besides, she could hardly fault Sera for preferring the company of the fun guy with the booze.

Bull and Sera made horrible jokes about the dead over supper, but Helen was grateful for the gallows humor. It kept her distracted enough to distance herself a bit from the surrounding horror. It also made it easier to ignore Solas.

Helen gave Solas the first watch and herself the last. It meant she would not have to interact with him again until morning. She slipped into their tent and got ready for bed.

**
After the others had gone to bed, Solas set his wards and watched a few corpses shamble in the distance. None of them came near the camp, so he left them alone.

Helen was annoyed with him. Yes, lighting the Veilfire sconce without warning the others had been shortsighted on his behalf. Still, such items fascinated him. What else had modern mages learned to do with the Veil?

Moreover, he had wanted to see what the runes looked like under Helen's omnitool. Observing his own healing magic the night before had been a revelation. It had never occurred to him that a non-mage could see it as well, much less one who would see it from a scholar's perspective.

Her unwillingness to scan the rune disappointed him. Helen was usually so curious about these things, but she had been in an unreasonably foul mood the entire day.

And now they were sharing a tent again. Being in such proximity with Helen had become, well, problematic.

Sera had once called Helen "plain." In many ways, Sera was right. Helen's mouth was too wide for her face, her nose a little too big. Her figure was not voluptuous, her manner inelegant. And her ears...they might be normal for a human, but their shape continuously took him by surprise, as if they'd been deformed.

Yet the thought of running his thumb across that wide mouth of hers made his heart race.

Maybe he should have taken Maisie up on her offer. They were headed to Redcliffe soon. Perhaps he could visit the alienage there, and find a temporary companion to help him take the edge off.

Helen, at least, had not noticed his attraction to her, for which he was grateful. For if she were to see, if she did reciprocate his feelings...

No. He would not, he could not, be that selfish. Not to Helen, not to the People.

When his watch was over, he woke Sera, warned her about the corpses, and went into his tent.

Helen lay on her side, curled up in a tight, twitching little ball. Her biotics flickered around her hands.

Solas watched her with concern as he undressed. When she started muttering in her own language, he knelt next to her. "Helen," he said softly as he lightly touched her shoulder.

She awoke instantly, sitting up as she looked around with terrified eyes. A moment later, she let out a relieved sigh. "Solas," she whispered.

"Your biotics were flaring," he explained.

Her brow wrinkled with worry. "I didn't do any damage, did I?"

"No. Everything is fine."

She lay back down. "Thank you for waking me."

Solas settled into his bedroll. They lay on their sides facing each other. "It must have been a very intense nightmare."

She nodded. "Geth and demons, husks and corpses, the undead all crying out to me in my parents' voices."

"Yet the thought of running his thumb across that wide mouth of hers made his heart race."

"Maybe he should have taken Maisie up on her offer. They were headed to Redcliffe soon. Perhaps he could visit the alienage there, and find a temporary companion to help him take the edge off."

"Helen, at least, had not noticed his attraction to her, for which he was grateful. For if she were to see, if she did reciprocate his feelings..."

"No. He would not, he could not, be that selfish. Not to Helen, not to the People."
Her parents. No wonder she had asked if the person's soul had remained in the body after death. Her terrible mood suddenly made sense. Solas had seen the corpses. Helen had seen the people they had once been.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. She squeezed it back, before letting it go and tucking it under her cheek. “Thank you for waking me,” she said, with a yawn. “Good night, Solas.” Moments later, she was asleep again.

Solas rolled over onto his other side, his back to Helen, lest he be tempted to stare at her for too long. After several minutes of recrimination, he finally allowed himself to fall asleep.

**

The following morning, the ground team stood underneath a small rift as Helen spoke with an Avaar barbarian about the status of the Inquisition’s soldiers. Apparently, the chieftain’s son was trying to make a name for himself.
“Damn, she's short,” Bull muttered to him. “I mean, I knew that already, but still.”

“Truly, your observational skills are a wonder to behold,” Solas replied.

The barbarian explained a bit of his religion to Helen. Solas had not studied much of the Avaar faith, but it was not based on Chantry teachings at all.
“Interesting how widely Ferelden beliefs diverge,” Solas remarked.

The Avaar bristled at that. “Call me Ferelden again, elf, and see how far you get!”

“Yeah, _elf_,” Bull snickered under his breath. “Have a little respect for the locals.”

Solas barely had time to glare at Bull before Helen called out battle positions. She opened the rift. The demons poured out. Helen's barriers were strong, and the fight was short.

When it was over, the barbarian looked at Helen. “You can heal the Lady of the Skies,” he said, wonder in his voice.

"It isn't me," she said. "It's the mark. What is your name?"

“Amund, Watcher of the Sky.”

“Well fought, Amund, Watcher of the Sky. I appreciate your help.”

“Watch the water, Herald of Andraste.”

They continued, running into more corpses and wraiths. They found another beacon, which Solas lit. And this time, when the battle was over, Helen scanned the rune with the omnitool as Solas illuminated it with the Veilfire.

“Oh!” she said, sounding surprised. “Would you mind lowering the torch for a moment?”

Solas did. Helen tapped on her omnitool and pointed a cone of soft, dark-purple light at the rune. The Veilfire writing was suddenly visible to them all.

“Can you see the light that I am pointing at this?” she asked.

“Barely,” Bull said. Solas had not realized the Qunari had been paying such close attention. Sera, of course, was rummaging through the abandoned crates and sacks for anything of value.

“It is faint but visible,” Solas agreed. “Why do you ask?”

“Just trying to get an idea of what elves and Qunari can physically see.” She tapped the omnitool off.

Solas held up the Veilfire torch again. “And when it was illuminated by the Veilfire, did you feel or hear anything? Any emotional resonance?”

“No.”

“None?” Solas asked.

“None.”

“Must be nice,” Bull said, grumpily. “Can we go now?”

They continued on their way, and Helen felt the presence of another rift. She followed the pull of the mark into a circular clearing with an altar on a small hilltop.

The magic here felt stronger and far more sinister than other rifts they had encountered. The rift spewed forth despair demons. A few corpses rose from where they lay on the ground. Once they were defeated, the emotional intensity only became stronger.
Solas felt the Revenant just before it emerged. An enormous corpse possessed and deformed by a powerful Pride demon, this Remnant brought two Despair demons in its wake. It turned its sightless gaze onto Solas. "You should not have come here, cousin," it growled, its voice barely recognizable as it tried to speak with rotting vocal cords.

It pulled out its sword with one hand and stalked towards him. Then it noticed Helen. Helen had just placed a barrier over Bull and Sera, who were being harassed by both Despair demons, but leaving herself vulnerable.

And the Revenant laughed.

Before Solas could do more than cry out a warning, the Revenant created a giant, magic fist, and yanked Helen halfway across the battlefield, right into its massive chest. "I have your pet, cousin!" it roared.

Then it backhanded Helen so hard that it lifted her off her feet and sent her flying several feet away.

Solas cried out in fury as one of the Despair demons surrounded his path in ice, preventing him from getting to Helen. "You always fail," it hissed at him. "She'll die because of you. They all die because of you."

He lit the Despair demon on fire. It screeched as it turned to ash.
Solans frantically turned towards Helen just in time to see her duck under the Revenant's swing, using her small size to her advantage. One side of her face was covered entirely in blood, and her jaw was hanging the wrong way, but Helen was still fighting furiously. She rolled behind the Revenant and Warped its armor.

“Herald!” Solas yelled. “Your barrier!”

As soon as her barrier was up, Solas poured fire onto the Revenant, the flames bouncing harmlessly off of Helen's barrier. Her Shockwave knocked the Revenant to its knees. One more Warp and the Revenant's spirit disintegrated into the rift.

Sera and Bull still fought the last Despair demon. Solas' fireball ended the battle in a moment, and Helen closed the rift. Solas Fade-Stepped to her side before she had even finished, utterly horrified at her ruined face.

As soon as the rift closed, Helen's knees buckled. He caught her and lowered them both to the ground.

The Revenant had pulverized the entire right side of her face, eyeball to jawline. Part of her earlobe was missing. A scan with his magic revealed a broken jaw, torn muscles and ligaments in her neck, and a herniated disc.

“Hold still,” he ordered. Then he called for Bull, who was already running over with Sera.

“Here, take her,” he said to Bull.

Bull took her gently into his arms, then looked at Solas, concern on his face. “Can you fix this?” he asked.

“Yes, but I will need both of my hands.”
He looked at Helen. "I am sorry, my friend, but this will be painful." Even before the Veil, this would have been a terrible injury. Now, with so much of his magic locked away, he could not afford to spare even a fraction of it for pain relief.

He first healed the muscles, tendons, and disc in her neck. He reconstructed her jaw. Then did he knit her flesh and skin back together, taking extra care that she would not be left with a scar.

Solas felt drained when it was over. Sera, of all people, wordlessly handed him a restoration potion. He wondered again if he should use lyrium, like the modern mages. This was, perhaps, one of the few times he would have been willing to do so.

Helen slowly sat up and gingerly felt her face. The blood on her armor and in her hair was still damp, but her skin was clean and unbroken.

"Nuvas ema ir’enastela, Solas. I am sorry to have caused you so much trouble." She pointed to where the Revenant had fallen. "What was that thing?"

"A Revenant," Solas said. "It is a dead body possessed by a powerful demon of desire or pride."

"That's a Revenant?" She sounded surprised. "I read about them in one of the books Commander Rutherford gave me. Its description lacked some important details."

They continued on their way, coming across a nearly hidden camp with an insane mage who attacked them on sight. Putting her down did not take long.

The camp also contained one of Solas' old Veil artifacts. Helen scanned the object, activated it, then scanned it again.

Solas had not personally installed every single artifact that he had made and used to create the Veil. He had, however, dictated where all of them would go. He had placed far fewer in what had then been uninhabited areas because fewer were needed.

What was now the Fallow Mire had been such a place. The statues, the monoliths, the *humans*—none had been here when he'd raised the Veil.

After making their way through more corpses, some hostile Avaar, and the final beacon, the ground team finally reached the Keep. A squadron of corpses guarded the front gate.

Helen looked at Bull with a grin. "You ready?"

"Are you serious?" Bull looked utterly delighted. "Oh shit, yeah!"

It wasn't until Sera started giggling that Solas realized that Helen was going to allow Bull to throw her into combat.

"You cannot be serious!" he hissed at her. "May I remind you, I just repaired your jaw. Which had been splintered open!"

She looked at him, her newly-healed face entirely too innocent. "And I appreciate it, my friend. If it helps, I promise I will not stop a Revenant's fist with my face."

"No! It does not help!"

Nobody listened. Solas had to stand there and watch a Ben-Hassrath spy throw the Herald of Andraste into a squadron of undead.
Corpses flew out to the sides. Some struggled to get back up, but most of them stayed down. Helen swept up the others in a Singularity. Solas and Sera followed in her wake. Bull mowed through bodies. Sera cackled like a madwoman as she shot arrows. Solas immolated whatever he could.

The A vaar that faced them inside the Keep were no match. It took little effort to reach to the giant barbarian who held the Inquisition's soldiers.

“Herald of Andraste! Face me!” he yelled, clearly beginning a monologue. “I am the Hand of Korth!”
“Shut it, puppy!” Helen yelled back, as she hitched a thumb over her shoulder. “We've just killed everything in this swamp! You're all that's left! Surrender and live, or fight me and die!”

The Hand of Korth threw his head back and shouted out a war cry.

“Oh, I am so over this,” Helen muttered, as she flicked a Singularity behind the barbarian's back where his archers stood.

It swept all three archers into the vortex. They reacted predictably.

The Fool of Korth turned around to see what all the fuss was about. Helen Warped his armor just as Sera threw a jar of bees onto him. His piercing shriek was far louder than his war cry had been only moments before.

“He sounds like you,” Sera said to Helen, as she shot arrows into the still-floating archers, “when you see a spider!”

Solas sent arcs of lightning into any approaching enemies, as Bull engaged the sword-and-shield Avaar who advanced towards them.

The Fool of Korth tripped over his own two feet and fell down the staircase where he had hoped to make his dramatic entrance. Bull ended his life. The remaining Avaar quickly followed him into death.

“I don't want to sound like a bad person,” Helen said, “but that man may have been too stupid to live.”

They located the missing Inquisition soldiers. They were shaken and had minor injuries, but alive. Solas tended to the injured, while Sera and Bull searched the place for anything unusual. The soldiers were genuinely impressed that the Herald had come for them.

When Solas finished healing the soldiers, he found that giant Avaar, the Skywatcher, pledging his loyalty to Helen.

Bull walked up behind Solas. “You know, for a gal who insists she's not the Herald of Andraste,” he said quietly, “she's getting herself quite the following.”

“And I am certain your superiors will tell you exactly how to feel about it once you make your little report.”

"You don't always have to be a dick, you know. I don't have anything against her, personally. I like her. She's a little too serious for my taste, but she's damn good in a fight. But you and I both know that when a new group of humans comes into power, everybody else eventually suffers. It's bad for your people, and it's bad for my people."

Solas opened his mouth to fully engage this Qunari bastard about his people, but Helen interrupted them. “Bicker later, you two,” she said as she started back towards the forward gates. “We're leaving this pisshole right now.”

Chapter End Notes
Many thanks, as always, to my betas for their work on this chapter. They have both been incredibly patient about looking at revisions. Any mistakes are mine, not theirs. ProctastiKate fans, sorry to disappoint but there are no renders this chapter. I had about two dozen screenshots to choose from. I have, however, seen what she is working on for upcoming chapters. You will not be disappointed.

Thank you to everybody who has left comments, kudos, and reviews!! I read them all and try to reply to most. I am deeply grateful to everyone who is continuing to follow Helen on her journey.
Chapter thirty-three

Chapter Summary

Returning to the Hinterlands has benefits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter thirty-three

In the Alliance, any time a shore party returned to the ship, they had to go through decontamination. For such an important safety process, it was actually very low-tech. The ground team stood in the decon chamber, in full kit, while UV beams scanned them for a couple of minutes from all sides.

Only then were they allowed onto the ship. Usually, they would head straight to the armory. Weapons were disassembled, cleaned, and tagged for repairs. Armor was removed and placed into automated lockers that scanned the armor, making minor repairs and sanitizing everything inside and out.

They'd called it the “Rattle Down.” If the shore party had engaged in combat, it was the “Battle Rattle Down,” and for a large shore party, the “Cattle Battle Rattle Down.”

The entire process was tedious but necessary. Not only did it find and locate hidden damage to weapons and armor, but it also killed microbes that might cause infection or disease to sweep through the ship.

Only after the Fallow Mire did Helen appreciate how much it had kept armor from smelling like a week-old pile of dead bodies. Because by the time they left the Fallow Mire, there was no way around it—they were ripe.

Advisors,

The Inquisition troops held captive in the Fallow Mire are free. I have ordered them back to Haven for a full debrief.

The Avaar idiot who captured them is dead, as are his followers. I did recruit one member of his tribe, a warrior who goes by the name, “Amund, Watcher of the Sky.” I asked him to report to Commander Rutherford when he arrives in Haven.

We are now headed to the Grand Forest Villa and should arrive in five days. Once there, the ground team will take two full days of rest before proceeding to Redcliff.

I realize this is short notice, but the four of us desperately need replacement armor and clothing. Between the Avaar, a Revenant, and hordes of undead, not only is our armor is beyond repair, it smells exactly like you would expect after fighting corpses in a bog.

If Vivienne could kindly meet us at the Dusklight camp in eight days, that would be helpful. I would like her there when we meet with the Grand Enchanter.
Sincerely,

H. Trevelyan

PS--just curious, but is there some strategic value to having a hold in the Fallow Mire? The place is, and I mean this sincerely, an absolute shithole.

The constant stench made for a much less pleasant trip back to the Hinterlands. None of them slept in tents, preferring instead to sleep out in the open near the campfire. It meant Helen couldn't use the omnitool but at least the smoke masked some of the stink.

Meanwhile, she thought long and hard about Solas' proposal to “meet in the Fade.”

Meeting him there would allow them some privacy that they otherwise did not have in the waking world. Helen could show Solas the memories of the vid from the Conclave. More than that, she could express her deepest fears—becoming a husk, or having her soul get stuck in the Fade.

Ever since the Fallow Mire, these fears were getting harder to suppress.

But...allowing Solas access to her innermost thoughts bothered her. Her memory of the dream he'd invaded had faded somewhat, as dreams tended to do. What she did remember was that she had not even realized he was present until the very end. How could she know he would not trawl through her mind?

And then there were her growing concerns about Solas himself.

That Revenant had called him “cousin.” Twice.

It was so bizarre, so out-of-place, that it had registered even as the Revenant backhanded her face into hamburger.

Of course, any concerns about Solas had instantly faded into irrelevance as deep, hot pain flooded her skull and neck. Her omnitool had helpfully informed her that she’d broken her jaw. She’d suffered massive lacerations to her face. She’d herniated disc C6/C7. She should report to an Initiative medical facility immediately.

There was no SmartArmor on Thedas, no medi-gel. Nobody carried pain blockers into battle.

Solas had used magic alone to heal her, and the process had been exquisitely painful.

As Solas had performed what amounted to reconstructive surgery in the field, Helen had used some half-remembered Asari breathing techniques to help with the pain. She had zoned out for a bit, fully aware of the pain but calm enough to let Solas work.

Getting her face cracked open by the Revenant had one positive benefit--it knocked away the last of Helen’s melancholy. Sera and Bull had the right of it, she decided. Irreverence would get her through this mission. Moping would not. She'd told Bull to throw her, knowing full well Solas would not approve. But she had needed to do something bold, something life-affirming in the moment. She was still alive, at least for now. She should act like it.

But later, after they left the Fallow Mire, Helen found herself looking once again at the disconnect between Solas' words and his actions.
Solas had revealed so little about his personal life that Helen could list all of it on one hand. He was an apostate from a village to the north. He had been alone for many years. He liked the Fade and the spirits who lived there. He had once been a soldier.

He sometimes referred to himself as a “humble” apostate, but “humble” only described his clothing.

Solas was anything but humble, and not just because he was completely incapable of letting anybody get in the last word. He carried himself like a high-ranking military officer. He spoke with ease about multiple subjects. He was fluent in at least three languages, and Helen suspected he was a true polyglot.

Maybe people on Thedas only saw the shape of his ears or his shabby appearance. But the longer Helen looked at Solas, the more his “humble apostate” label seemed like a cover story.

If it was a cover story, she’d certainly seen worse (Blackwall sprang to mind as a recent example.) She just didn’t know why he needed it, and it brought her no closer to understanding why the Revenant saw him as kin.

And in any event, revealing to Solas that she’d understood what the Revenant would also disclose the existence of her UT.

Helen kept all of these thoughts to herself as they traveled. We’ll be at the Villa in a few days, she decided. I’ll show him the Conclave vid then.

But until she knew more about who Solas was, her dreams would remain her own.

**

They arrived at the Villa in the middle of the afternoon. Everybody gave them a wide berth. Even the stablehands wrinkled their noses at the smell. The head groom ordered them to drop their bedrolls outside the stable and shooed them away.

But what awaited them inside was so marvelous that Helen nearly wept with joy when she heard.

The Inquisition had fixed the indoor plumbing.

The Villa now housed five full baths, which all included a toilet, a sink, and bathing facilities.

A scout—in fact, Helen was pretty sure it was the woman who had partied with Maisie and Bull—led Helen to the master bedroom. The room had been cleaned out. The walls were newly whitewashed and boasted a few bookshelves.

“Oh, Maker, Herald,” the woman said, with a hand over her nose. “No offense.”

“None taken. Try living with it for five days.”

“There's the bath,” she said, pointing with her free hand. “Whoever owned this place before, they knew how to live, I tell you. There's a dwarven rune that heats the water as it comes out. It's the handle on the left. Just throw your armor and clothing out here. What do you want to do with it?”

“Burn it? Send it to our enemies, piece by piece? I don't care, as long as I don't ever have to wear it again.”

The scout giggled. “I'll have it burned.”
“Good. And thank you, Scout...?”

“Arling, Herald. I'm Scout Arling.”

“Nice to meet you, Scout Arling. And thank you again.” Arling left, closing the door behind her, as Helen inspected the bath.

The shower was a single shower head, about two meters above a drain, and open to the room. The floor was covered in plain, light-colored tiles. Opposite the shower sat a pull-handle toilet with no lid, and a sink with a small mirror above it.

Helen thought it the most beautiful room she had ever seen. A skylight let plenty of natural light. A stack of clean towels sat on a shelf, and a basket held soap and shampoo.

She stripped herself naked, dumped everything she had been wearing on the floor of the bedroom, and locked herself inside the bathroom.

Then she took her first hot shower since before she'd entered cryo back in the Milky Way. She washed everything twice, just to get clean. She washed a third time, just because she could.

She left the bathroom wrapped in towels to find clean clothes and armor waiting for her on a cot. Helen put on the smallclothes and underarmor, and then read the note that lay on top of the armor.

    Dearest Helen,

    The Fallow Mire sounds horrid! I do not know how you endured such a revolting place.

    Master Harritt sends this armor for you to wear until your return to Haven. In the meantime, Master Harritt has asked me to inform you that he will begin making a new set of armor for you immediately.

    I feel I should apologize for the ugliness of this armor. I promise that it was was the best I could do on such short notice.

    At least the armor for both Solas and the Iron Bull is presentable. I chose it with an eye towards cultural significance. Hopefully, it will tell the mages in Redcliffe that the Inquisition takes any worthy candidate, regardless of race or background.

    Try not to work too much during your days of rest. I know how easy it is to ignore your own counsel. And write to me personally and let me know how you are doing.

    Ever yours,

    Josie

The armor was black leather with mint-green plating, and a bright, white scarf. Helen put it on, then she combed her hair. Her hair had grown out in the last several weeks, and now her bangs fell into her eyes.
She didn't think the armor ugly, but she did think it made her look like a vicious Girl Scout.

Helen tucked Josie's letter into a pocket and walked out onto the balcony. She saw Solas on the opposite walkway, pacing slowly. She left the master bedroom and walked across the adjacent courtyard until she found him standing in his new armor, with his eyes closed.

Even standing still, the man managed to look put-upon.
His last armor had resembled a bathrobe. This armor looked like almost ceremonial, with lots of braided leather, and decoration. It was beautiful, and it emphasized his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

“That is lovely armor, Solas,” she said.

Solas opened his eyes and said, through gritted teeth, “It is Dalish.”

Helen was unsure why that was a problem. “Do the Dalish make shoddy armor or something?”

“The armor itself is fine. But I am not Dalish,” he said with an air of forced patience, “as any Dalish who sees me will know by my lack of vallaslin.”

“I see. Josie thought, well, here. Read for yourself.” She handed him the note that Josie had written to her.

He read it. His lips pressed together tightly. “Of course, the human ambassador lumps all elves together as if we are a monolithic culture!” he snapped.

Personally, Helen thought he was overreacting. On the other hand, she was not about to get involved in an argument about Thedosian culture wars, especially not with this man.

“If it offends you so, go downstairs and exchange it with the quartermaster,” she said, using the I-am-your-reasonable-commander tone of voice she’d once used with members of other ground teams in a different galaxy. “You can wear standard Inquisition armor until we return to Haven. Perhaps you can write to Josie and explain why she's being insensitive. She is a diplomat. She’ll appreciate the correction, especially if it means she avoids another misstep.”

He just glared at her.

Cranky. Helen held her hand out for the note from Josie. He gave it back to her. “Try and enjoy your time off, Solas,” she said neutrally.

She headed downstairs and talked to the Logistics Officer, a middle-aged surface dwarf named Gurden.

Gurden was deeply proud to be part of the Inquisition. He had been at the Villa for only nine days, but already he and his team had repaired much of the plumbing, set up a small forge, and blocked off access to the western side of the property.

“I love it here, Herald,” he told her sincerely. “There is so much potential.”

The plumbing included a clever drip system that would water any hanging plants on the trellises. Most of the smaller pipes were damaged or rusted shut, so they would need to be replaced, but the few that still functioned were slowly dripping water into potted medicinal herbs. When he was finished, there would be cooking herbs on the balcony off of the kitchens.

What most impressed Gurden, however, was the septic system. It had only needed minor repairs to be fully functional. Helen’s family had had a septic system on their farm. She and Gurden spent a very relaxing half-hour discussing water filtration techniques and waste disposal.

When her stomach started growling, she left Gurden to his work and headed to the mess. Along the way, she bumped into Bull.
Solas might have loathed his new armor, but Bull openly preened in his. “Check it out, Boss!” He turned back and forth so that she could admire him from all angles.

They chatted as they made their way to the mess area and ate supper. “Where's Sera?” Helen asked him, as she was finishing her second bowl of stew.

“Asleep. She got cleaned up and went straight to bed. Between you and me, I think being on the road has been a lot harder on her then she wants to admit.”

Helen snorted into her mug of cider. “That, and a certain somebody encouraging her to keep pace with his drinking.”

“Hey, she's a grown woman, she makes her own decisions.”

“She certainly does. But Bull, you must know how much she looks up to you.”

“Yes, well...” Bull had an almost fatherly smile on his face, “I like her, too. I mean, she's a mess, but she's got a lot of sweet in her. Just don't tell her I said so.”

Scout Arling was headed in their direction, her eyes on Bull. “Not in the quartermaster's office,” Helen warned him. “I have work to do tonight.”

“No problem, Boss.”

Helen picked up her plate and left, nodding at Scout Arling as they passed. After placing her dishes in the mess tub and snagging another bottle of cider for herself, Helen headed down to the quartermaster's office.

She closed the door, sat down at the desk and began to look at the results of her scans in the Fallow Mire.

First, she examined at the flora and fauna she'd scanned. Bogfishers were descended from the Batarian colony of Lorek, a dump of a planet that really stretched the term, “garden world.” Lorek, tidally locked to its sun, had once belonged to the Asari. The Batarians stole it, as they tended to do, and the Asari never put much effort into getting it back.

Then she looked at all of the DNA she had scanned from the corpses.

She had scanned over one hundred individuals in the Fallow Mire. Five had been elves—three males and two females. Two of the men had been brothers. Both had the genetic markers for the extra receptors in their nervous system. Unlike the other elves she'd scanned so far, these receptors were not dormant.

The rest of the DNA belonged to humans, many of them closely related. Based on what the DNA was telling her, the area had been settled within the last few hundred years by about thirty settlers. Their descendants had brought in enough new blood from outside the colony to keep the genetic stock reasonably diverse. Helen saw little evidence of inbreeding.

More interesting was how many people, including those not descended from the original settlers, shared ancestors around 4000 years ago. It was something she had seen before with a few of the
bodies of the East Road Company.

The pathogen that had swept through the area and killed its inhabitants had been an extremely virulent form of tuberculosis. It had been a little too effective. It had killed its victims so quickly that nobody had survived long enough to carry the pathogen elsewhere.

The fact that most of the corpses showed signs of chronic malnutrition might also explain why they had been so susceptible to the--

Somebody knocked on the door. She turned off the omnitool. “Come in.”

Solas, still in his new armor, opened the door. It was fully dark outside. “I hope I am not interrupting?”

“No. How late is it?”

“First watch is nearly over.”

She'd been in here for hours. “Sorry, I lost track of time. And actually, I know it's late, but do you have a moment?”

Solas closed the door behind him. “You want to show me what happened at the Conclave,” he guessed.

Helen nodded, and Solas dragged a chair over next to her. He turned the chair around backwards and sat with his arms resting on top of the back.

She routed the omnitool's audio out of combat mode, so that Solas could hear it, too, but kept the volume extremely low.

Resting her right arm on the desk, she played the vid for Solas. She skipped most of the walking through the ice and snow, showing him only when the video started, just so he could understand where she had started from.

At first, he asked questions. What was that blinking at the bottom of the screen? (Her vitals) Who was that speaking? (The VI) What was it saying? (Get help.) What was she saying? (Where's a water fountain.)

But when they got to the part where they heard Justinia's voice, Solas went utterly still. They watched the rest of the video in silence.

When it was over and she turned it off, Solas let out a heavy exhale, as if he had been holding his breath the entire time. He wiped a hand over his skull and down his face. “That is...highly unnerving to witness,” he said, his voice quiet and shaken. “It is a wonder you survived at all.”

“Justinia survived, too. Had she not sacrificed herself for me, she would still be here.”

“Had she not sacrificed herself for you, nobody would be alive to close the Breach.”

“Which was still my fault,” Helen whispered, desperately trying, and failing, to keep her emotions in check. She dashed the back of her hand against her eyes to wipe away the tears that were forming against her will.

“Helen, no. Listen to me,” Solas reached over and placed his hand on her shoulder. “That orb, the one you thought of as technology? It is elven. I have seen such things before. They were foci, used
to channel ancient magicks. That mage, whoever he was, was trying to unlock it and harness its power. The explosion would have happened no matter who touched it. That it happened to be you was just—"

“Bad luck,” Helen interrupted. “And my own stupidity.”

“Our good fortune,” Solas replied firmly, as he picked up her left hand. “Do you really think that a man who would sacrifice Divine Justinia would be using this mark to repair the world? To free slaves and help the common people wherever he could? Whatever he intended to do with this mark, I doubt it was to make the world a better place.”

Helen shrugged.

“What were you saying in the Fade, when you and Justinia were being chased?” Solas asked.

“I was saying, ‘Please, no, not the Geth.’ But all the omnitool showed were balls of light.”

“They were fearlings, reflecting the fears of those around them. You told me once that you were not afraid of much.”

“But I am afraid of Geth,” Helen completed his sentence. “Yes. I am.”

“I do not know why the Grey Wardens were involved,” Solas mused, as he let go of her hand. “Nor am I certain how people will react when they learn of the orb’s origin.”

“What do you mean?” Helen asked.

“If the Chantry learns an elven artifact destroyed the Conclave and killed the Divine,” Solas wiped both his palms down his face again. “I shudder to think of what they would do in retaliation.”

“Well, nobody will hear it from me,” Helen said. Solas let out a small sigh, and his shoulders visibly relaxed.

They were silent for a moment. Helen thought about Justinia's soul looking down at her. “What would happen if my soul did get stuck in the Fade?” she asked.

Solas looked at her with sympathetic eyes. “Helen, such occurrences are extremely rare. I do not think it is likely to happen to you.”

“Humor me. When it does happen, what is it like?”

Solas looked at his hands as if he were avoiding her gaze. After a long moment, he said, “In theory, it depends on the person. The Fade is shaped by intention and will. A soul of strong will and peaceful intentions could create a place of harmony for themselves.

“In reality, however, the few souls that become trapped often find the Fade frightening, or confusing. They wish only to return to the living and their loved ones. Many go mad, and that madness is reflected in the Fade that surrounds them.”

“I see.” Well, hearing her deepest fear confirmed as a possibility did not make her feel any better. Helen turned in her chair to face him. “Solas, I want you to promise me something.”

“What is it?”

“If I die closing the Breach, or, well, anywhere, for that matter,” she cleared her throat before she continued. “If I get stuck in the Fade, promise me you'll come find me, and get me out of there.”
Solas exhaled, then stood up and turned his chair around. When he sat back down, he faced Helen. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and took both of her hands in his. “I cannot promise that, falon. That is not how the Fade works, particularly not with you.”

“What do you mean, 'not with me'?”

He frowned, looking almost confused. It was not a look she was accustomed to seeing on him. “You affected the Fade in a way I have never seen before. The space around you, your thoughts and feelings, felt almost physical. Massive.

“And yet none of it was of the Fade. The only reason I could even see it at all was because we were physically touching. If your soul remained after you died, I would have no certain way of finding you.”

Helen felt her spirits sink. She lowered her gaze to try and keep her emotions under control. If she were trapped here, neither alive nor dead, she could not think of a worse fate.

“May I ask you a question?” he said.

Helen nodded. “Yes.”

“When you dream, are you aware of that fact?”

Helen thought about it. “Not exactly, although there are certain realities that I am always aware of, no matter the dream.”

“Such as?”

“My parents' deaths. My biotics. My time in the Alliance. Things like that.”

He nodded. He let go of her right hand and opened the palm of her left, cradled it in his hands. “There is something that might help,” Solas said, as he gently ran his thumbs over the mark. “Allow me to meet you in the Fade. I can show you how to recognize the Fade in a conscious way. It may help you learn which paths to avoid when the time comes.”

She was about to say no, had opened her mouth to say it, but something in his voice caught her ear. She glanced up at him.

Helen had once asked him if he had any family in the waking world. He had looked at her with such bottomless grief in his eyes that she had known his answer before he'd given it.

That same expression was on his face now, and it was there for her.

*He's helping me in the only way he knows how.* Whatever painful or embarrassing memories Solas might witness, and whatever her concerns about him personally, all paled to the fear of being trapped in the Fade for all eternity.

“All right,” she said. “Let's meet in the Fade.”
I apologize for the delay in between chapters recently. End-of-year business and the normal crush of the holidays has left me with far less writing time than I would wish.

To ProcrastiKate's fans (i.e., everybody) unfortunately, there are no renders in this chapter. All of the illustrations are screenshots only, as this was yet another chapter where I had more screenshots that I could have possibly needed. On the upside, the next chapter will have some of the best work I've ever seen from ProcrastiKate.

Thank you, as always, to my incredibly patient betas for their help and feedback on this chapter.

Finally, thank you to everybody for reading, commenting, and reviewing. It means more to me than I can possibly say.

I hope all of you are having a beautiful holiday, of whatever type you celebrate, and I wish all of you a safe and happy New Year.
Chapter thirty-four

Chapter Summary

Fen' Harel recruits an agent. Helen jogs in Vancouver.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirty-four

“All right,” she said. “Let's meet in the Fade.”

Solas suggested they wait until they were back on the road, pointing out that Helen had done very little actual resting since they had arrived. Helen agreed, and they parted ways for the night.

What he left unsaid was that waiting would provide less opportunity for gossip. Sera and Bull might understand that Solas and Helen were not lovers, but rank and file Inquisition scouts would not.

His low expectations were confirmed the following morning. He sat on a bench reading a book he had found in the Villa's kitchen (“The Medicinal Herbs of Ferelden and Orlais: A Compendium by Sister Julia DuRoche”) when a sardonic voice said, “Well. Aren’t you fancy in your new armor.”

“Hello, Maisie,” he said, turning to face the scout.

“Oh, look at that. You remember my name.”

The playful softness she’d displayed the other night had been born of alcohol and desire. Now that she was sober, and in the presence of a man who had rejected her advances, Maisie was all hard edges and suspicion.

He could use that.

Solas looked her full in the eyes and allowed the barest, secretive smile to touch his lips.

“Walk with me.” Then he turned and casually strolled towards the western half of the property.

She followed him, as he knew she would.

“If you're looking for a roll now, you missed your chance,” she said.

*If I wanted you, he thought, you would be spread naked on a table in the mess, begging for me in front of the entire camp.*

Telling her that, however, would be counterproductive.

“I assure you, I am not looking for 'a roll,’” he said, as he led her to the western edge of the Villa. “I am here to offer a job.”

She pointed at the Inquisition sigil on her uniform. “Already got one of those, thanks.”
“This would not interfere with your duties for the Inquisition,” he said quietly. “In fact, I am offering this job to you because you are Inquisition.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you out of your mind?” she hissed in a barely audible whisper. “I don't just work for the Inquisition. I work for the Nightingale!”

“A fact of which I am well aware. I have no interest in bringing the wrath of Leliana down onto you or any other elf.” He slightly emphasized the last word.

She blinked. Her expression smoothed out a bit, but she remained cautious. “What would I be doing, exactly?”

“Nothing taxing,” he said, as he fished several coppers from his pocket and handed them to her. “I do not want you to do anything that would jeopardize the Inquisition or yourself. Fulfill your duties to the spymaster as you ordinarily would. I am more interested in rumors you might hear among the scouts and soldiers. Anything that seems odd or unusual.”

“Odd or unusual in what way?”

“Enough for you to notice. I am not looking for anything specific. I only need a pair of sharp eyes and open ears.”

Maisie stared at the coppers in her open palm for a moment as she contemplated Solas’ offer. “Why?” she asked after a moment. “What's your goal?”

“At the moment? To seal the Breach. After that?” He chose his words carefully. “The Inquisition offers a unique opportunity for the progress of the People. You can help make those paths clear.” He gave her a couple of his drop locations and instructions on how to reach him.

The coppers disappeared into a pocket. Maisie crossed her arms and studied him. “You know, if I'd known you were with the Herald, I'd have never acted the way I did. Sera told me explicitly that you were not into shemlen.”

“As shocking as it is for me to say this, Sera was correct.”

Maisie rolled her eyes. “You were locked up in the quartermaster's office with the Herald until early morning.”

“I am one of her advisors and the Inquisition's expert on the Fade. We were discussing matters concerning the Breach. The Herald is a good person and a dear friend, but we are not romantically involved.”

“Uh-huh. Friends don't hold hands in the moonlight while they dangle their bare feet in a pond.”

“Enough, da'len,” he said, allowing just a hint of impatience into his tone. “The Herald risks her life to save us all from the Breach and asks nothing in return. Her own people are lost to her. I feel no shame in giving such a small comfort to a friend so far from home.”

Maisie raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“You know how to reach me should the need arise,” Solas said. He nodded his farewell and headed back to the Villa. He kept his expression neutral and his pace casual. To any observer, he was the very picture of serenity.

But Maisie's words rankled more than Solas wanted to admit.
Solas saw little of anybody else for the rest of the day. Nobody sought him out, except for Helen, and even then only in passing. He had been sitting alone in the mess, pretending to eat, when Helen walked in with the Logistics Officer, a dwarf so garrulous that he made Varric look shy. Helen never broke her stride, nor did she interrupt the man’s enthusiastic speech about the support structure of the Villa. But as she passed Solas, she dropped off a small bundle of papers without saying a word.


He looked up, but she had already left the mess. Solas abandoned his food, picked up the papers and spent the rest of the evening reading. It was astounding. Over the course of only a few centuries, her people had gone from casting rainbows with glass to mastering travel between galaxies.

The section on what her people called “quantum mechanics” both fascinated and confused him. They spoke of existence in terms of probabilities. They had managed to measure things with incredible accuracy, yet they also seemed to believe that there was only so much that could be predicted.

Solas could sink deep into his own magic and see the forces that held the physical world together. He knew that what appeared to be a solid, physical thing—a lump of iron, for example—was a latticework of interconnected points of energy.

This had once been common knowledge among the educated of Arlathan, but much of this wisdom had been lost over the centuries. Here in the south, Circle mages were punished for delving too deeply into the mysteries of their own magic. Still, the knowledge was there. It had always been there, observable to any mage who made the effort.

Her people, without any magic at all, had gone even more in-depth, learning things about the very nature of existence that he had never considered. They had discovered it for themselves using only the power of their intellect.

If this is what her people did without magic, he wondered, what would they have accomplished with it?

The four of them left the Villa the following afternoon. Helen wanted to look at another astrarium. They would camp overnight there, then meet Madame de Fer and travel to Redcliffe.

Once they were underway, Solas trotted up next to her. “Thank you for the treatise on spectroscopy. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I wanted to ask some questions about ‘quantum mechanics.’”

“I don’t know much,” Helen warned him. “I never went to university. The physics classes I took in the Alliance were practical, not theoretical.”
“I understand, and am grateful for whatever knowledge you can share,” he assured her. “The paper mentioned something called The Standard Model but never set forth what it is.”

They talked the rest of the afternoon. Helen explained that the Standard Model had started out as a collection of theories that described the tiniest particles of existence. Eventually, it became comprehensive enough to explain the most astronomical bodies in the universe, such as galaxies.

“The discovery of element zero answered some questions about how gravity and dark energy are connected but raised others.”

“What's dark energy?” Bull asked. The question surprised Solas. He had not thought the Qunari would be interested in such matters.

“Energy that we couldn't see with our instruments. We could only see its effects. This would be easier to explain with my omnitool.”

By the time they had arrived at the astrarium, Helen had declared that he had exhausted her knowledge of physics. “I have more articles and books in my omnitool’s library,” she told him. “I will print some up for you when we get back to Haven.”

After camp had been set up, Solas and Helen hiked to the astrarium. Helen scanned it as discreetly as possible, then listened intently to whatever the omnitool was saying into her ear. “Interesting,” she said after a few minutes. Then she solved the simple constellation puzzle and made a note of where it pointed.

“What did you learn?” Solas asked her, knowing the answer.

“That underneath all of that ugly glazed tile, it’s one of those Veil artifacts we've been activating.”

“That is interesting,” Solas said, neutrally. “The artifacts help strengthen the Veil. If many of them have been re-purposed like this, it might explain why this area has seen so much demon activity.”

“Should we fix it?” she asked him.

Yes, he wanted to say. We should. We should gather them all and take them to Tarasyl'an Te'las. It is the only place where I could study them properly and find out what those damned Tevinters did to my work.

“I would hardly know where to begin,” he told her instead, “and such a process would require time we do not have.”

Helen nodded, taking his word for it, and headed back to the campfire to help make supper. After a moment of looking at the astrarium, Solas followed her, leaving the small monument to his failure behind him.

**

That evening in their tent, after they were ready for bed, Helen asked, “So, how do we meet in the Fade, exactly?”

Solas extinguished the lamp and said, “Lie down on your back, please.”

She did, and so did he. “I am going to cast a mild relaxation spell which will help you to remain asleep the first time you walk the Fade.” She nodded her permission, and he cast the spell.
“Think of a place that is emotionally neutral to you, that holds neither great heartache nor great joy, yet offers a sense of calmness.”

After a moment, she said. “All right.”

He gently took her left hand in his right and led her through some breathing exercises. He kept his voice low and soothing, slipping into the ancient Elvhen words he had once used to train other Dreamers long ago.

It did not take long for her breathing to smooth out and slow. He waited a few minutes to make sure she was asleep, then slipped across the Veil and into the Fade.

He found himself in the largest city he had ever seen.

Helen was jogging on a wide walkway that ran all along the waterfront. Her clothing—short pants, a breast band, a loose, sleeveless shirt, socks and sturdy shoes—would have scandalized the Chantry but was the norm here. Her white ponytail bounced and swayed as she jogged.

Her emotional state was calm and unfocused, a result of his relaxation spell, no doubt. Yet even here, her left hand glowed green with his mark.

Solas made her the center of his focus, giving the appearance of her running in place while everything moved around them. It allowed him to observe everything here without having to chase after her, as well.

The city was magnificent! Impossibly tall buildings, sleek and gleaming, nestled up against a waterfront that bustled with life. A nearby pier housed a structure with a roof that looked like white sails. Shuttles soared through the skies. All of this had been done without any magic at all.

She shared the walkway with pedestrians, with other runners, and with people who skated by on wheeled boots. Everybody was human.

Solas subtly pushed against her dream to see if anything changed. Nothing did. He pushed harder. Still nothing. He tried pushing against it with all of his will. Nothing.

Curious, he reached for the Fade and tried to pull it through into her dream space. Helen's dream remained as physical and solid as the waking world.

He propped his hand up under his chin and tapped his mouth with one finger. This was quite fascinating. In the dreams of most people, Solas had to barely issue a thought for his will to override the dream, or at least influence it. Here, he could not even get her attention. Her will was reality, and his was irrelevant.

Solas tried pushing his own emotions at Helen, like smoke signals. Pride. Desire. Despair. One after another he tried to attract her notice, but she remained as oblivious to his efforts as if she had been in her own galaxy.

The only thing he had to show for his efforts was one too-familiar Desire demon. “I must admit,” it said lazily, “that I enjoy watching you struggle.”

“Why are you here?” he asked it. “Surely you do not want to be banished a third time?”

“If you didn't want Desire, you shouldn't have shoved all of yours in her direction. I can't help what you feel.”
Solas sighed. “You make a fair point. I apologize.”

“Besides,” Desire said as it watched Helen run, “I already told you. She never takes anything we offer her.”

Solas gave it a sharp look. “How often are you making 'offers’?”

“None of your business. You banished me from your space, not hers.”

Solas ignored the demon and considered his options. He clothed himself in what the males here wore, and placed himself further up the path so that she now ran towards him.

Helen noticed him moments later, confusion on her face as she got closer. She stopped in front of him, recognition in her eyes.

“Solas.” She looked around. “I had forgotten you were coming,” she said, her accent a bit thicker than in the waking world. “Is this the Fade?”

“This is you. We are in the Fade but what you have created here is apart from it,” he said. “Where is this?”

“The North Shore in Vancouver. I worked here for several years.” She turned around and pointed to a wide, pale building. A large, stylized arch and three stars were painted on the side of it. “That’s Alliance headquarters. I would go jogging a few times a week over my lunch break when the weather was nice.”

Then she looked him over. “Athletic gear suits you,” she told him, a smile tugging at her lips.

“Yes. Well.” He ignored the urge to preen, especially with Desire so close. “I appreciate the compliment, but we need to focus on the task at hand. What does this place mean to you?”

Helen's emotional state turned introspective and curious. “Purpose, I suppose. I had friends here. I am proud of the research I did. But I also made some choices that I regret. When I feel homesick, it isn't Vancouver I miss.”
“For a place you do not miss, you know it quite well. This is an astounding level of detail. May I ask you some questions?”

“Of course.”

“How do you make those things fly without magic?” he demanded, pointing up at the shuttles.

“There’s a small mass effect core in every shuttle. Thrusters provide direction.”

“I see,” he said, a bit disappointed. “You make it sound so ordinary.”

“It is ordinary, at least to me. Humanity achieved flight almost two and a half centuries before I was born, before we’d discovered eezo, even. I can show you, if you’d like. It’s all on my omintool.”

“I would like that very much.”

“Anytime, Solas, you only need to ask.” Her dark, happy eyes sparkled up at him.
He kept his hands clasped tightly behind him and looked away for something to ask after. He found it in the blue sky behind her. “Is that one of your moons?”

She glanced over her shoulder and then turned around to face it. “That is our only moon.”

“Just the one?” he asked, stepping closer to stand next to her.

“Just the one.”

“It is so small!” he exclaimed.

“Well, it’s further away from our planet than your moons are from Thedas. Still, it’s not a bad little moon. We have a colony there, and the Alliance has a base.”

“People live there?”

She nodded. “Over four million. On a clear night, you can sometimes see the domes of Armstrong from Earth.”

“Have you been there yourself?”

“Several times.”

“Can you see your world from there?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How wonderful,” he breathed.

She smiled at him tenderly. Her feelings were as bright as the sunshine itself. There was curiosity, yes, and an undercurrent of caution about Solas himself. But mostly what he felt from Helen was deep fondness and admiration, even a little bit of attraction. And all of it was unburdened by political intrigue or hidden motives.

She cared for him. As a person.

Solas wanted to bask in her warmth, wanted to smile at her, as open and caring towards her as she was to him.

“I apologize,” he said, trying to rearrange his emotions into something more appropriate. “We are here to teach you how to navigate the Fade, not sate my curiosity.”

Helen’s smile melted away, and she sighed. “You are right, of course. So. What do I do?”

Solas looked out over the city. “The reality you have created presents a unique problem. How do you leave a dream if you are not aware of what it is?”

She blinked as she thought about it. “I am not sure what you mean.”

“You believe we are here. Therefore, here we are. How do we leave?

Helen looked a bit exasperated. “I don't know! I've never shared a dream with anybody before, much less tried to escape from one. If you have a suggestion, I'll hear it.”

“This is as new to me as it is to you, da'len. Normally, I can go into the Fade and control my dreams in whatever way I choose. I have done it for ages. Yet I cannot change one thing about
what you have made here.

“So tell me. How do we leave this place?”

She looked out at the cityscape for a long time. Then she said, “Oh!” and the city vanished. They stood in the raw Fade. Solas put himself back into his regular clothing. Helen’s appearance, including armor, was just as it had looked earlier that day.


“I pulled it all back into my head.”

“How can you return us?” They stood again on the North Shore. Solas pushed against it with all of his magical might. It remained unwavering.

“Now pull it back.” It vanished. They stood once again in the Fade. “Your willpower is quite formidable, Helen. I cannot decide if I am disappointed that you are not a mage, or relieved that you are not a Templar.”

Helen shrugged. “I doubt I am very different from any other human in the Milky Way. If you weren’t here, I’d just be drifting through whatever my mind conjured up for me.” She looked around. “Is this what the Fade is like for you?”

“No,” he chuckled. “Would you like to see how I explore the Fade?”

“Of course.”

“Ferelden has deep memories of battles and bloodshed going back for centuries. I am certain we could find something.”

“Lead the way.”

So he did. He found the memories of a family of minor nobility who had raised their own mage children at home instead of carting them off to the Circles. None had been powerful mages, but they did possess a talent for domestic magic.

For over a century during the Exalted and Steel ages, the area became known for bountiful crops, healthy babies, and its residents' longevity.

Then the Templars appeared. The adult mages used what few combat skills they possessed to give their non-mage family and servants time to escape. One of the non-mage daughters argued with her father, the patriarch of the family. “Templars don't put people into Circles for harboring apostates,” he told her. “They just kill them. Now go.”

Every mage died, except for the two young children who escaped with their governess. The Templars razed the estate. The surrounding area quickly slid back into the rural poverty that marked most of Ferelden.

Helen had observed much of the dream with a solemn look on her face, but when the Templars attacked, her biotics flared around her hands. He reached for her wrist to stop her. “Sorry,” she said. “I know logically that this is in the past, but it feels very present.”

He kept his hand on her wrist and did not object when she laced their fingers together.

Once the dream was over, Solas said, “I must take my leave. My watch is starting soon.”
Helen nodded. “Thank you, Solas, for doing this for me.”

“It was my pleasure.” They were facing each other. Solas was surprised to realize that he was holding both of her hands clasped in his, and cradled against his chest. He wished to brush her bangs out of her eyes, the better to gaze into them. He even had a mad moment where he thought he was about to slide his hands around her waist to pull her closer. The urge was so strong that he glanced around to see if Desire was nearby causing mischief.

It was not.

Helen looked puzzled, feeling both hope and caution in equal measure. Her eyes sketched back and forth between his. “Solas?”

“Ah,” he said, forcing his panic down, “sleep well, my friend.” Then, like a coward, he popped out of the Fade.

He awoke. Helen was still in her bedroll. He, however, had practically wrapped himself around her like some lovesick fool.
He quickly cast another mild relaxation spell before disentangling himself. It meant she would not wake up for her watch but a few hours of lost sleep was preferable to her waking up in his arms.
He put his armor back on and stepped out of the tent. Sera warned him that some feral dogs had come up to the edge of camp earlier, and then she went to bed.

Solas walked the perimeter and checked his wards. Then he watched the skies and tried in vain to focus his thoughts on any subject that did not involve Helen. Or how her eyes looked when she was curious. Or how her voice shaped his name. Or how she'd felt in his arms.

“Palan'em,” he muttered.

Fuck me.

Chapter End Notes

OK, so first off, we have not one, not two, but THREE original renders by ProcrastiKate! She has been putting these together for a few weeks. I am just blown away! The woman has some serious skills. Thank you, ProcrastiKate, for being such a huge part of "Half-Life,” and for sharing your talents with the rest of us mortals.

Second, I need to give major props to my betas. This chapter has undergone a few major OS updates, so to speak. They looked through them all and kept the prose from getting too out of hand.

Third, I want to thank every single "Half-Life" reader. It means more than I can say to see the outpouring of love and support you have for Helen. Thank you for reading, and for leaving kudos and reviews.

Finally, for my readers who are up to speed on quantum mechanics, Helen is describing the physics of the Mass Effect universe, not the real world Standard Model. http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Dark_energy

I want all of you to have the happiest and healthiest of New Years! I can't wait to see what 2018 brings for Helen!!
Chapter thirty-five

Chapter Summary

Helen and the ground team meet the mages in Redcliffe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirty-five

Helen awoke that morning to an empty tent and the light of sunrise bleeding through the canvas walls.

Shit. She’d missed her watch. She threw on her armor and scrambled out of the tent.

Solas sat at the campfire, making the ground team's breakfast. “Solas!” she said, surprised. “Did you cover my watch?”

“I did,” he replied, as he began to pour her a cup of coffee. “You needed the rest. You got little of it at the Villa.”

“Thank you,” she said. She did feel more rested than she had in the five and a half months since she’d arrived on Thedas. “And thank you for showing me how to manage the Fade.”

“You showed yourself, my friend. I only provided the opportunity to learn.”

“Still, I appreciate it.”

He handed her the coffee and their eyes met. Solas' expression was neutral, but his cheeks and the tips of his ears were very pink. Helen had a momentary flash of a moment in their shared dream—Solas, gently pulling her quite close, and holding both of her hands against his chest.

Bull stumbled out of his tent, yawning and adjusting his eye-patch. Helen greeted him, and the morning continued as usual, and soon they were on their way.

They met Vivienne at Dusklight Camp, and then the five of them set off for Redcliffe. Sera needed to go to the alienage (Helen suspected it had to do with the Jennies). The rest of her current retinue would meet with Fiona.

They had barely started before Vivienne implied that, as an apostate, Solas lacked the training to handle everything they might face. Solas pointed out that he had figured out how to seal the rifts at Haven, while Vivienne had not been there at all.

And so it began. For the next twenty minutes, they bitterly argued. Solas believed the Circles were prisons. Vivienne saw them as absolutely necessary. Solas accused Vivienne of using the Circle as a way to increase her own power. Vivienne readily agreed, arguing it wasn't her fault other mages didn't work the system to their advantage. Solas chided her for ignoring the plight of her fellow mages.
Back and forth they went. All the while, Helen, Bull, and Sera looked at each other helplessly as two powerful mages, each with a boomstick on their back, viciously baited each other.

It almost made Helen grateful to see the rift outside of Redcliffe's gates.

The gratitude didn't last. The rift twisted the kinetic energy around it, creating spots where one moved very fast or very slow.

Helen became stuck in one of the distortions where it felt like she'd landed in molasses. It was an odd feeling. The effect did not tire her, but it frustrated her to see everybody else move so much faster.
“What just happened?” Helen asked after she sealed the rift.

“Temporal distortion, perhaps?” Vivienne asked. “None of my reports mentioned anything like that.”

Solas agreed, noting that the Veil here was much weaker than in Haven, and “altered in a way I
As soon as they entered the gates, they learned that, firstly, nobody knew they were coming, and secondly, some Tevinter magister now fancied himself in charge.

Helen kept her grumbling to herself. Sometimes missions started off on the wrong foot and never got back on track. She couldn't do much about it except plow forward.

Redcliffe had the feel of a frontier town. Cords of lumber and pallets of stone were evident on most corners. A castle, home to the local Arl, sat on an island in the middle of the lake.

Helen pointed at the ruins of a town that lay just across the narrow inlet. “What happened over there?”

"Possession and the Blight happened, my dear," Vivienne answered. She explained how the Arl and his wife had concealed their young son's magical abilities. Without proper training, the boy had become an abomination.

"Darkspawn and the undead attacked the village," Vivienne continued. "The Hero of Ferelden and her friends rallied the townsfolk. Most of the buildings were destroyed, but many lives were saved that night, no doubt because Solona Amell was a highly trained Circle mage."

"Who found the shorter lifespan and inherent danger of the Grey Wardens preferable to the tyranny of the Chantry!" Solas retorted.

_Goddamnit._ Helen stopped walking and turned around to face her mages.

“_We. Are on. A mission._” Helen's voice was icy and quiet, "and you two are arguing politics. Stop bitching. That's an order."

Solas and Vivienne stared at her with identically affronted expressions on their faces. _Oh, look, they have something in common._

Helen turned on her heel. They walked the rest of the way in stony silence. As soon as they arrived at the square, Sera scammed for the alienage. Helen could hardly blame her.

The ground team garnered quite a few stares. Well, more accurately, people stared at Bull, Solas, and Vivienne. Helen looked relatively ordinary in comparison. It allowed her to observe the locals without really being noticed.

She saw Circle mages standing around in fretful little clusters, while the townsfolk treated them with intense distrust.

They heard that the Arl had been run out of town. And nobody, Circle mage or not, seemed to like the Tevinters.

Fiona awaited them inside the pub and greeted them cautiously. Vivienne pounced, gleefully telling the former Grand Enchanter that she looked "dreadful."
Fiona gave a small shrug as if Vivienne's opinion was the least of her concerns. She turned to Helen and said, "Why have you come here?"

"Because you asked me to," Helen said.
Fiona looked at her blankly.

“You came to Val Royeaux as the Templars were leaving. You asked me to come to Redcliffe and talk with you.”

Blank stare.

“Even though you were right there! In Val Royeaux,” Helen said, not bothering to hide her exasperation at the convoluted machinations of Thedas. “Your request is the only reason I am here.”

Fiona protested that she had not heard the Templars had left Val Royeaux. In fact, she had not been to Val Royeaux since before the Conclave but, gosh! That sure did sound strange!

They were interrupted by the entrance of a short, smarmy man. A younger, much less smarmy man followed him.

This, Fiona explained, was Gereon Alexius, the magister to whom the mages had sold themselves into indentured servitude. Bull, Vivienne, and Solas took turns explaining to Fiona why slavery was a Very Bad Idea.

Helen pinched the bridge of her nose, and whispered in English, “Begin passive recording.”

“Acknowledged,” the VI said into her ear.

Alexius introduced the younger man as his son, Felix. Alexius glossed over the terms of the mages' servitude (slaves were so expensive!) and his reasons for usurping the Arl (for safety, of course).

Mostly, though, Alexius stared at Helen - and only Helen - with oily intensity.

Helen felt adrift. She had come here to talk to Fiona and secure the mages for the Breach. Instead, she was talking to an agent of an arguably hostile foreign power.

*Your mission objective is to close the Breach.*

With that in mind, she invited Alexius to sit down and negotiate.

They had barely begun when Felix stumbled towards them, aiming himself right at Helen. She jumped up to catch him. As he apologized, she felt him discreetly tuck something into her gauntlet.

Alexius, meanwhile, transformed from creeper asshole to frightened dad. He grabbed Felix and Fiona and hustled out of there.

Helen sighed and fished out whatever Felix had just stuffed into her armor.

It was a note. “Come to the Chantry. You are in danger.” She switched to English. “God forbid that anybody on this stupid planet ever communicates in anything other than the most roundabout, bullshit way possible.”

“Muttering in your own language is getting us nowhere, my dear,” Vivienne said serenely.

Helen switched back to Common. “‘Getting nowhere’ is the national sport of Thedas. I'll fit right in.”

They spoke with a couple of the Circle mages in the tavern. One was already gloating about the
power mages would have in the Imperium. “It’s slavery,” Helen pointed out to the woman. “Just how much power do you think you’re going to have?” The young woman rolled her eyes and sneered.

The other mage was a Chantry loyalist who hated Tevinter and wanted the Circles reformed. Vivienne liked him a lot.

They started to leave but a young man with a starburst tattoo on his forehead—no, not a tattoo, a brand—stopped them.

In a flat tone of voice, he introduced himself as Clemence. He was Tranquil, he explained. Alexius had ordered the Tranquil to leave Redcliffe, and he had nowhere to go. Could the Inquisition perhaps use his skills as an alchemist?

Helen's earlier annoyance drained away. The advisors had briefly explained Tranquility to her not long after she’d arrived on Thedas. She’d heard it mentioned in passing, and Solas had railed against it once or twice. And, of course, she’d read Varric’s books, but she’d assumed he was taking some artistic license in his descriptions of the Tranquil.

He hadn’t. Talking to Clemence was quickly filling in quite a lot of missing information.

"Yes, we could," Helen told him. "Here, let me write up some orders."

Helen fished out quill, ink, and paper from her pack, and wrote two orders. One would go to Cullen to explain Clarence's situation. The other would go with Clarence himself. "Take this to one of the Inquisition scouts at the front gates," she told him. "They'll make sure you get back to Haven."

Vivienne unexpectedly took the note and pinned it to Clemence's chest. “Keep this here until you get back to Haven,” she said to him in a maternal tone of voice. “Don’t talk to anybody other than Inquisition, understand?”

He said he did. Vivienne made him repeat the instructions back to her before she seemed satisfied.

He thanked them, saying it was good to be useful as long as one still lived.

After they had stepped outside the tavern, Helen turned on Vivienne. "That's a Tranquil?" she hissed furiously. “That's what the Chantry does to mages they deem inadequate?”

“It’s far better than the alternative, my dear,” Vivienne said serenely. “A single abomination can wipe out an entire town. If you don’t believe me, just look across the lake.”

“You’ve lobotomized him!” Helen exclaimed, using the English medical term. There was no equivalent in the Common.

Solas frowned at her reaction. “There are Tranquil in Haven. Have you not seen one before now?”

“I've hardly been in Haven,” Helen pointed out. “Most of my time on Thedas has been in the field.”

She pushed her anger down. They could deal with this later. Right now, she needed to spring a trap in the Redcliffe Chantry.

Whatever she had expected when they opened the doors, it was not the rift, the demons and the mage who was fighting them.
“Good! You're finally here!” he said, cheerfully. “Now help me close this, would you?”

Helen threw a barrier over all of them. The kinetic distortions they had encountered outside the gates of Redcliffe were here, too. Solas was caught in one that slowed him down. He Fade Stepped out of it. Vivienne, on the other hand, seemed to know where the faster distortions were and Fade Stepped into them. Helen became stuck in one of the slow spots again.

Once the demons were dead, she closed the rift. The stranger studied her with his hand under his chin. When she finished, he walked over.

He and Helen sized each other up. Helen saw armor that valued style over protection. A glorious physique. Pomade in his hair and mustache. Guyliner. He was beautiful, and he knew it.

“What sort of magic are you using, exactly?” he asked her. “I’ve never felt a barrier like that before.”

“It isn’t magic. And it’s a long story. Now, who are you and why are you here?”

He introduced himself as Dorian Pavus, a mage from the Tevinter Imperium. He was here to stop Alexius from using time magic.

“From using what again?” Helen looked at him carefully to see if he was having her on.

No, this man was quite seriously suggesting that Alexius had used time travel to take the mages away from the Inquisition.


Solas, surprisingly, did not dismiss the idea out of hand, although he did express concern over the danger.

Helen raised an eyebrow but otherwise, kept her mouth shut. She knew that time travel was physically impossible, but this was neither the time nor the place to discuss it.

Instead, she questioned Dorian about himself, about Felix, and a bit about Tevinter.

Finally, Felix himself showed up. He told her that his father had joined a cult of Tevinter supremacists. Not only did Felix believe time travel was possible, but he also claimed that his father was using it to get to Helen herself.

"Why me?" she asked. Neither man knew for sure, although Dorian suspected it had to do with the mark on her hand.

Finally, Felix had to leave. Dorian told Helen that, if she went after Alexius, he wanted to be there. He bowed with a flourish and left.

As soon as they were alone, Helen let out an exasperated breath. “What a load of unadulterated bullshit.”

“What do you mean?” Solas asked.

“That nonsense about time travel. It’s physically impossible.”

“It is improbable,” Solas said. “I would caution, however, about dismissing such a claim out of hand. You saw yourself the way time twisted around the rifts here, did you not?”
"That wasn't time distortion; it was kinetic distortion. Here, I'll show you."

She held up her wrist. "End recording."

"Acknowledged."

She pulled up her omnitool and fast forwarded it to the part where they were fighting in the Chantry. "See? Look here. I was stuck in one of those slower distortions, but the timer on my omnitool was not affected at all. Time moved as it always moves planetside—in one direction, and at the same pace."

"What do you mean, 'planetside'?"

"Time does become distorted when you approach the speed of light, which you can only do in space. Even that is more perception than anything. It isn't time travel in the sense that—"

"What in Andraste's name is that?"

Vivienne stared with anger and fear at Helen's omnitool.

"Oh, um, right." Helen had forgotten that Vivienne had not seen it before. "This is my omnitool. I gave it a voice command in the tavern. It has been recording everything until just a moment ago when I turned it off."

Vivienne said nothing, although her eyebrows had reached her hairline.

Helen rewound the vid and showed them talking to Fiona. They watched it for a few moments, just long enough for Vivienne to get the idea.

"Are you planning to travel back to Haven with us?" Helen asked Vivienne.

"Yes."

"Then you'll see me use this in the field. We've been trying to keep it somewhat discreet, at least until the advisors have seen it. I would appreciate the same discretion from you."

"You shall have it," Vivienne said. The enchanter's expression had gone from angry to speculative, as she scrutinized Helen.

"Questions?" Helen asked.

"Dozens, my dear, but we have more pressing issues right now."

Helen nodded and turned the omnitool off. She looked around the Chantry.

The only other Chantry she'd seen had been the one in Haven. The Haven Chantry was plain. It had reminded Helen more of a VFW hall than a house of worship.

The Chantry here in Redcliffe looked like her grandmother's Catholic church. It had an altar, incense burners, and several stained glass windows.

She walked up to the altar to get a better look at the stained glass.

Helen Trevelyan was an atheist, like her parents. She'd paid no attention to religion back in the Milky Way. Likewise, she'd paid almost no attention to religion here on Thedas.
Now, as she looked at the stained glass, she realized just how bloody the Chantry's founding had been.

“What does that show?” she asked, pointing at the first panel.

“The corruption of the Golden City,” Vivienne explained, who then gave a quick but thorough
overview of each of the seven panels. "Andraste's Herald should know her history, my dear."

Helen, who had been staring at Shartan, looked Vivienne in the eye and said, "I am not Andraste's Herald."

"I know, darling, but that hardly matters. People believe you are, which gives you power far more fickle than that mark. You must understand what that belief entails, lest you end up having more in common with Andraste than anybody would wish."

Helen sighed and looked up at the panel of Hessarian ending Andraste's suffering with his sword. A group of people on the Storm Coast were now loyal to her, an atheist from another galaxy, because of their belief in a woman who died centuries before.

_Thousands of years_, she thought, forlornly. _Thousands of years and a whole new galaxy and all we did was make the same damn mistakes._

"Thank you, Vivienne," she said turning away from the gory tableau. "I appreciate the history."

"Anytime, my dear."

The left the Chantry and found Sera was waiting for them. "D'you 'member Revas?" she asked Helen. "The boy that attacked us that night?"

"Yes."

"His mum wants to talk to you."

"About?"

"To thank you, I think. I was there to talk to 'im about the Jennies, but I couldn't tell her that, obviously. So I just acted like I was checking on him to make sure he was all right and things. Now she wants to meet you." Sera scratched her nose. "It's just the alienage, yeah? Not like a dungeon or a rift or anythin'. Just don't mention the Jennies to her."

"I will stay here and speak with the mages," Vivienne said. "I expect there are more loyalists to be found. Shall I meet you back at camp?" She left without waiting for an answer.

Helen looked at Bull and Solas. "You two don't have to come with me."

"I will accompany you, at least for the moment," Solas said.

Bull just shrugged. "I'll go. Got nothin' else to do."

Sera led them to an open, unattended gate that was in poor repair. They walked right through. "The 'Vints must be spread pretty thin," Bull said.

"Agreed," Solas said.

"What do you mean?" Helen asked.

"By law, elves are not permitted to arm themselves inside an alienage," Solas explained. "Normally, Sera and I would have been ordered to surrender our weapons at the gate. On the other hand, there are no guards to prevent the Tevinters from raiding the alienage for slaves."

"I see," Helen said.
Unlike the rest of Redcliffe, the buildings here were more like shanties. The occasional plank of wood had scorch marks. Indeed, it looked as if the alienage was repurposing wood from the ruins across the inlet to rebuild their homes, while the rest of Redcliffe had gotten new lumber and high-quality stone. Clotheslines stretched across second story windows, and a sidewalk doubled as an open sewer.

It wasn't the worst slum Helen had ever walked through—nobody here was in a gunfight, or giving blowjobs in alleys for a hit of red sand—but it was the worst place she'd seen on Thedas so far.

As Helen looked at the alienage, the alienage looked at her, or, more accurately, her companions. Elves stopped what they were doing and openly stared at them, and none more than Bull.

Solas, usually so talkative about elves and elven culture, was strangely silent. After several minutes, he said, “If you will excuse me, I have business to attend.” He broke off from the group and vanished down an alleyway.

Sera snorted and mimicked Solas. "'I have business to attend.' Git. He even makes going to the brothel sound like a chore.'"

_The what now?_

"How do you know he's going to a brothel?" Helen asked.

“Nothin’ else down that alley.”

_Ah._

Helen brutally shoved away the disappointment bubbling up inside her. Solas owed her nothing. _Nothing_. Besides, it wasn't as if she'd made herself available for a physical relationship. At least now she knew where she stood with him. It made things more straightforward. And anyway, it was none of her business.

_Don’t cry. Don’t bitch. Don’t blame_. Especially not when Bull was watching her reaction so closely.

Sera finally stopped outside a shanty which looked like every other shanty on the block. Young children who had been playing tag became very quiet. One sucked her thumb as she stared at Bull. Sera rapped on the door once. “Marta!”

A middle-aged elven woman too skinny for her height answered the door. Revas was behind her, peering at them all with open curiosity.

“That's her,” Sera said, gesturing at Helen.

Marta wordlessly pulled Helen into an embrace, which Helen returned. “Thank you,” Marta whispered. “Thank you for returning him to me.”

"He returned on his own. All I did was knock some sense into him.”

Marta chuckled and pulled away, wiping her eyes. “Revas, boy, what do you say?”

“Thankyouforsavingme,” he mumbled.

"Thank you for coming back," Helen said. Marta led herself and Helen onto a bench, and they sat down.
"I was sorry to hear about your husband," Helen told her. They spoke for twenty minutes or so about Marta's life and family. Neighbors came out to listen, or to stare at Bull. While Marta was distracted, Sera tugged Revas around the corner to talk for a minute.

The thumb-sucker toddled over to Helen. "Up," she said. Then she popped her thumb back in her mouth.

Helen picked the toddler up and put her on her lap. The little girl alternated between sucking her thumb and playing with Helen's silly scarf.

"Have the 'Vints come into the alienage?" Bull asked.

"Not yet," Marta said, "but that's my biggest fear."

"I didn't send your son back home just to be captured by slavers," Helen said. "I'll send word to the Inquisition tonight to see what options we have."

Marta shrugged, apparently not expecting much.

It was getting late. Helen stood up, and they all said their goodbyes. They left the alienage and headed back to camp.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I owe a great deal to both of my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. This was another one of those chapters that underwent a couple of major overhauls. Dreadlordcherrycake, in particular, gave me some critical feedback on the early drafts. It kept this chapter from being a giant word salad.

We also have another gorgeous render by ProcrastiKate! I am incredibly grateful to her for her willingness to keep working with me on "Half-Life." She tumblrs over at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/

Finally, thank you to all of you for the kudos, reads, and reviews. I am so humbled by the support you're all giving to Helen as she continues her journey.
Chapter thirty-six

Chapter Summary

Dorian travels south.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirty-six

The port city of Asariel looked deceptively optimistic at night. Street lamps, a beautiful lighthouse, and lanterns strung along the docks all cast the city in a flattering glow.

Dorian knew better. He had lived here for several years while he’d trained with Gereon Alexius. Magisters and merchants alike used the city’s lax enforcement of tariffs to smuggle everything from lyrium to slaves.

The sheer amount of wealth that exchanged hands in Asariel allowed for indulgence on a scale hard to find outside of Minrathous. Dorian himself had lost more time than he cared to admit at places like “The Slippery Ring” and “The Back Door.”

That had all been years ago, before Alexius had rescued Dorian from what would have otherwise been a short life of wasted potential.

Alexius had become both mentor and friend. Once upon a time, Dorian had genuinely believed that Alexius would help bring long-overdue reforms to Tevinter.

Then Felix had become infected with the taint. Gereon obsessed over finding a cure, and instead had lost his way. Had it only been four years since Dorian had stormed out of the Alexius estate right here in Asariel, vowing never to return?

Now he was back in this stain of a city. He hated being here, hated the memories of hope gone sour, but he had needed a place to stay. His friend, Maevaris Tilani, had holdings throughout the Imperium. She had permitted him to live at any of her properties, should the need arise.

And Dorian most definitely had the need. After barely escaping his father's wicked grasp, Dorian had forsaken his inheritance. Now he wandered the Imperium, imposing on the good graces of friends like Maevaris.

The door of the balcony opened behind him, interrupting his dark thoughts with a flood of warm lamplight. “Brooding doesn’t suit you, you know,” Maevaris said.

“I am not brooding,” Dorian said, in mock protest as he turned to face her. “I’m increasing your property values with my gallant presence.”

Maevaris smiled. “The arrogance certainly suits you. Come inside, amicus, and pour me a drink. We need to talk.”

Dorian followed Maevaris into the salon, which had once been the favored room of her late
husband, Thorold Tethras. Thorold had liked to conduct business as well as entertain in here. His influence could still be seen in the dwarven furniture and the hearthstone fireplace. Maevaris had added her own exquisite touches since his passing, replacing the bronto hide upholstery with richly-colored tapestry, and adding heavy, silk draperies to the once-bare windows.

More impressive than the room’s furnishings, however, were the silencing runes in the walls. Once the doors closed, the runes linked up to create a web of privacy almost impossible to penetrate from the outside.

Dorian headed to the small bar. He poured red wine for himself and a sweet Rivaini brandy for Maevaris. They sat down on the divan, and he gave Maevaris her drink.

She took a sip, then pulled a letter from the pocket of her dress. "A courier arrived not long ago. Felix has finally sent word."

She handed the letter to Dorian.

Maevaris,

I hope this letter finds you quickly. Father has lost his mind. He's joined up with some cultists that call themselves the Venatori. They want to restore the former glory of the Imperium or some such rot.

Now he's dragged us down to Redcliffe. It all has something to do with the so-called "Herald of Andraste," but I don't know what.

Find Dorian. Tell him to come to Redcliffe now. Father's using the time magic they used to study. It warps the Veil here in Redcliffe, and I fear for all of Thedas if he isn't stopped.

Maker save me, you can see the Breach even from here.

Felix A.

"He must be very anxious," Maevaris mused. "His letters are usually so polite."

Dorian got up and started rummaging through the bookshelves until he found a map of southern Thedas. "What have you heard about the Breach?" he asked, bringing the map over to the little table in front of the settee and sitting next to Maevaris.

"The same as you, almost nothing. It's just Kirkwall all over again, isn't it? As long as the southern mages are oppressed, they will continue to--"

"No, no, no, not the politics, Maevie. I mean the Breach itself." Dorian traced a finger from the tiny dot that represented Haven and traced it over to the Imperial Highway that led to Redcliffe. "I'd just assumed it was an overgrown rift. But if it's visible even in Redcliffe…"

Maevaris raised a delicately manicured hand to her mouth and gasped. "It must be enormous."

"The Veil must be thinner than lace down there," Dorian said. "And Alexius is using experimental time magic? He'll tear the whole world apart."

Maevaris stood up, walked over to her desk and released the spell that kept it locked. She began pulling out papers and pouches of coin. "I will secure passage for you through the ambassadoria.
You'll have to go by ship, but they can get you there as quickly as possible."

Dorian felt a rush of affection for his friend. He hadn’t even needed to ask. “I’ll go pack,” he said.

**

He left early the following morning. As he traveled south, the rich, flowing accents of Tevene gave way to the clipped, guttural accents of Nevarra and finally, to the broad twang of Ferelden.

Everybody in Tevinter knew about the war between the southern mages and Templars, but Dorian had not fully appreciated just how much damage the war had caused until he arrived in the Nevarran port city of Cumberland.

Tevinter magisters derisively referred to Cumberland as, “Minrathous for dead people,” but as a necromancer himself, Dorian had quite liked the city. It was the cosmopolitan center of the South, and its cultural heritage rivaled Minrathous itself.

Dorian had assumed that a city as large as Cumberland would be immune from the mage-Templar war. Yet as his carriage passed the Sun Dome, home of the Cumberland Circle, Dorian could see pitting and scorch marks visible on the famous landmark.

Later, as he waited in line to board his ship in the Cumberland port, he found himself the recipient of angry glares and suspicious mutters. He was unsure if it was because he was a mage or because he was from Tevinter.

His concerns about the war temporarily vanished once the ship set sail across the Waking Sea. Dorian spent most of the trip in steerage, drinking one tonic after another in vain hope of keeping the nausea at bay. The only good thing he could say for the trip was that everybody, passengers and crew alike, talked non-stop about this "Herald of Andraste."

Everybody “knew” the truth about the Herald, it seemed. She was a mage. No, a warrior. No no, you sods were all wrong, the Herald was a rogue. She was bald. She was scarred. She was hideously ugly.

Some rumors were beyond ludicrous. His personal favorite was that the Herald was from another world, and could invisibly throw grown men over buildings.

Finally, he arrived at Redcliffe’s docks in the middle of the night. He was smuggled into a small, filthy hut, which had nothing to recommend it except that it was on solid ground. He sent word to Felix that he had arrived, and then he fell asleep.

Dorian was still in the Fade when the cabin door burst open, bringing the bright, Ferelden sunshine right into his tired eyes.

“Maker, Dorian, you look terrible.”

“Lovely to see you, too, Felix. Now shut that blasted door.”

Felix chuckled and closed the door. He lit the lamps, then handed Dorian a large sack. It contained food and drink. After days of seasickness, Dorian was famished. He devoured everything as Felix brought him up to date.

It was worse than he'd imagined. Alexius had made multiple attempts to travel back in time. Felix still had not figured out why, but it revolved around the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes and the surviving "Herald of Andraste."
"They're obsessed with her," he said. "Father altered time to get to the mages first, before she could. Several reports saw the Herald talking with Grand Enchanter Fiona in Val Royeaux. But Fiona was here, Dorian. Father secured the mages just as the Templars were about to wipe them out."

“Convenient,” Dorian mused. “What do we know about the Herald?”

"Rumors, mostly. Best I can tell, she's a mage. I've spoken to a couple of people who saw her fight at the Crossroads north of here. They said her barrier was so strong no Templar could breach it. Apparently, she'll tell anybody who asks that she doesn't believe in the Maker. And some of the elves here in Redcliffe swear she's an abolitionist."

Dorian let out a surprised cough of laughter. “Not playing the popularity card, is she? Right, well, what’s the plan now?”

“For now, we wait,” Felix said, “and see who she upsets next.”

So, Dorian waited. And as he waited, he learned that he intensely disliked the South.

It was cold. It smelled like dog. Everybody here was entirely too devout. Every morning, he awoke to hear Chantry sisters proclaim the Chant of Light with indecent fervency.

Dorian was staying out of sight, so he had to wait inside the appalling accommodations. The Fereldens' idea of hospitality consisted of a hunk of cheese, a bottle of ale, and a filthy mattress in the corner.

After two days of this, Felix stopped in again. "I can't stay, but she's at the gates."

Dorian scrawled off a quick note. “Get this to her somehow, and meet us in the Chantry when you can.”

Dorian snuck himself into that dreary little Chantry. He'd been sitting there, contemplating the ugly stained glass, when a rift opened up above him.

"Really?" He pulled his staff off of his back and killed the demons that poured forth.

The time around the rift warped and twisted, some places moving faster, others slower. Maker, Alexius, what have you done here?

Dorian fought through several waves of shades and wraiths, each a bit stronger than the one before.

Just as he was getting tired, a plain, little girl, with white hair and a green hand entered the Chantry, bringing two mages and a Qunari warrior with her.

“Good! You're finally here! Now help me close this, would you?”

The little girl had done this sort of thing before. She called out positions to her friends, then covered everybody in the most substantial barrier he had ever witnessed.

Her magic was bizarre and utterly soundless. She trapped two shades in a swirling vortex, leaving the party free to focus on other, more immediate threats. It was so effective a means of crowd control that it made Dorian wonder why nobody had thought of it before.

When the fighting was over, Dorian watched the little girl closed the rift.
“What sort of magic are you using, exactly?” he asked her. “I’ve never felt a barrier like that before.”

“It isn’t magic. And it’s a long story.” She crossed her arms and sank slightly back into one heel, putting most of her weight on one hip. “Now, who are you and why are you here?” she demanded.

Her rough, heavily accented voice carried the weight of experience. Dorian took a closer look at her features and noticed the fine lines around her eyes and mouth.

_Not such a little girl, then._

As Dorian introduced himself, he gave a quick glance over the Herald and her companions. An elf mage so powerful that the Fade practically danced around him. A human mage whose exquisite fashion sense marked her as none other than Court Enchanter Vivienne de Fer. And a Qunari warrior wearing _scandalous_ armor and an eye patch.

Dorian explained his reasons for being there. The more he talked, the more suspicious the Herald looked.
“Time travel?” she asked, incredulously. "Time travel," she repeated. "You honestly expect me to believe that." Her accent marked her as a foreigner but damned if he could tell from where.

"I know what I'm talking about," he protested. He explained how he had once been Alexius' apprentice and the research they had done back in Minrathous. He pointed to the temporal distortions they had just witnessed as evidence.

The Herald just shook her head.

She didn't believe him. Damn. This was not going well at all.

Then Felix arrived, bless him, and backed up Dorian's story. Felix explained that his father had joined the Venatori cult. The Herald did not dismiss that threat out of hand, at least.

Madame de Fer inspected her nails.

The Qunari slowly looked him over and, just as slowly, licked his lips.

The elf, at least, took Dorian's claims a bit more seriously, although he, too, expressed skepticism.

In the end, Dorian had to walk away. He'd delivered his warning, and he needed to leave before
Alexius discovered he was here.

But this wasn't the end. *His own magic* was being used to tear the world apart. Dorian had many problems with the name of Pavus but he would damned before he would allow his family to be associated with the destruction of all of Thedas.

When the Herald made her move, he would be there, whether she wanted it or not.

Chapter End Notes

As always, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen gave very helpful and very specific guidance on this chapter. I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for their feedback on introducing Dorian as a POV character.

Sorry, ProcrastiKate fans, there are no renders this chapter, just plain ol’ screenshots.

And thank you to everybody for reading and reviewing and commenting! My real-life duties have been fairly substantial, as of late. Getting the time and space to write has been a bit of a challenge, but Helen is not one to be ignored for long. Thank you all so much for continuing to support her on her journey.
Chapter thirty-seven

Chapter Summary

Solas visits the brothel in Redcliffe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirty-seven

‘I have business to attend.’ Git. He even makes going to the brothel sound like a chore.”

Solas overheard Sera's comment. He had imagined Bull would be the one to say something, but no matter. Neither Sera nor Bull had even a passing familiarity with the concept of discretion.

Solas had counted on one of them announcing it within Helen’s hearing, which would hopefully cause Helen to distance herself.

And Solas needed Helen to pull away. He was no longer confident he had the wherewithal to do it on his own.

He had spent the morning bickering with Vivienne as much to keep his mind off of Helen as to show the First Enchanter the multiple errors of her ways. Righteous indignation was an old, familiar path. Solas welcomed the distraction the same way a drowning man welcomes a rope.

Then Helen, damn her, had tossed her head, eyes flashing in anger, and scolded them both like recalcitrant children. She’d issued her orders, spun on her heel and marched off, her pert little bottom taunting him with her every step.

Solas wanted to apologize for causing her distress as much as he wanted to run his tongue over her flank.

The morning wore on. Helen sliced through the machinations of Thedas, pushing aside the extraneous nonsense. That morning she was alternatingly angry, compassionate and questioning. Even when she disagreed with him - no, especially when she disagreed with him - Solas found himself admiring her words, as well as the mouth that formed them.

It shamed him, how much he was aching for release. Had he the time, he would have gone into the alienage and chatted up a local woman to find a willing bed partner for the night.

Such activities, however, would require an investment of time he did not have.

The basest part of him wanted to storm the Redcliffe brothel, find the most nubile elven woman there, and have her tend to his needs until he could no longer walk.

But alienage prostitutes were not the courtesans of Arlathan. Those men and women had been powerful, respected mages in their own right. They would work spells deep into the body. Foreplay could go on for weeks. Release could last for days.
An alienage brothel was not a pleasure palace from the days of old. It was a place of desperation and despair. The prostitutes there had no power, took no pride in their work. No matter his physical needs, Solas could not and would not take advantage of a modern elf laid so low.

Instead, his purpose for visiting Redcliffe’s brothel was a matter of politics. That it would also dampen Helen’s latent attraction to him was a necessary evil.

Solas placed a glamor on his armor and staff before entering the brothel, making it appear as if he wore workman’s clothing and a knapsack. Whatever the rules were for elves in alienages, no madam anywhere wanted an armed clientele.

The brothel was a three-storied shanty. A handful of prostitutes sat talking to each other or patrons. The madam—an old elf with ears so withered that they drooped—stood behind a long table that acted as both reception area and bar. Bottles of cheap wine and whiskey lined the shelf behind her. He walked over to her.

“Don’t believe I’ve seen ye here before, luv,” the old madam said.

“You have not. I am here to speak with Elina.”

“Why? Wot’s she done? She in trouble?”

“No trouble,” he assured her.

Now the madam looked confused. “Elina ain’t on the rotation, lad; she’s housekeeping.”

“I am aware. I need to speak with her.”

The madam looked him up and down. “Ye jus’ want to talk?”

“Just talk,” he agreed.

The old woman shrugged. "Just talkin's five coppers. Ye can talk in the laundry room. Ye do anythin' more than talk, and I'll charge ye double, understand? Be done before bells. No refunds.”

She pointed a palsied, gnarled finger to a door at the end of the hall. "I'll send Elina to ye shortly."

Solas entered a room with tubs, washing boards and soap powders stacked against the walls. He leaned his backside against a table, crossed his arms and faced the door.

Moments later, it opened, and in walked a middle-aged elven woman with a sour face.

She recognized him immediately. “You!” she said, surprised.

“Close the door, please,” he said. “We need to talk.”

"I shoulda known," she said, as she shook her head and closed the door. "I shoulda known one of you Inquisition bastards would track me down and demand some kind of repayment."

For this woman, Elina, was the angry slave they had rescued, just days after Helen had closed the rift at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

Solas cast a silencing spell over the room. “I am not here to seek repayment, Elina, only to ask a favor.”

“How do you know my name?”
I know it because rage demons feed upon your dreams like lyrium addicts. Had Elina been a mage, she would have burned to ashes long ago. But, as he had with Maisie, Solas could channel this woman’s anger into something far more productive.

“The Inquisition keeps records,” he shrugged. It was a true statement. Irrelevant but true. “When I last saw you, your group had been placed under the protection of the Inquisition,” he said. “You were artisans. How did you end up here?”

“Artisans,” she spat. “We was woodcarvers, my husband and me. One of the few things you can do when the law only allows you a knife no larger than your own hand. Just how many bowls and wooden spoons d’ya think I can make on my own?”

Not enough, obviously.

“The younger ones joined up with your Inquisition. The rest of us came back here to Redcliffe. Nowhere else to go. So here I am,” she gestured bitterly around them, “cleaning up after whores.”

“I am sorry for your troubles, Elina.”

“Oh, for Maker’s sake, ask your favor and get on with it.”

He inclined his head once. “Very well. For now, I am helping the Herald and the Inquisition close the Breach. However, once my duties there are complete, there will be a unique opportunity to restore the People.”

She frowned. “What, like those riots like they had in Denerim?”

“Nothing like that,” he assured her.

“What, then?”

“Eventually? A voice in government, choosing our own laws. The right to bear arms, like every other race in Thedas. Living where we choose and where our talents take us. An end to watching our children starve. An end to slavery!”

He found himself swept up by his own rhetoric as he described at some length the vision he sought. Would her husband have been murdered if he had been allowed to train with a sword from childhood, like any human or dwarf or Qunari? Would nobles flout the anti-slavery laws so openly if elves were not punished merely for fighting back in self-defense? Would the humans be so quick to pay poverty wages if elves like herself could live where they wanted?

Elina hung on his every word. Where before, her brown eyes had glittered with anger, now they burned bright with hope and purpose.

She was his.

He calmed his voice and demeanor. “This is not Inquisition business. It has nothing to do with the Chantry, or the humans, or anybody at all, except the People. It will take time and effort and planning.

“Our organization needs people in Redcliffe. People who can listen, who can inform, who can keep secrets. If you do this, I can send a small stipend every month. Not much, but it will be free and clear of the madam, and you can use it as you wish.

“If this does not interest you, I will trouble you no further. The choice is yours.”
Of course, she said yes. They spoke until his time was up, then Solas left.

He arrived at Dusklight just after sundown. The camp bustled with activity. Helen and Vivienne stood at the farthest end of the enclosure. The Tranquil that Helen had recruited earlier in the day sat on a log nearby. Bull and Sera traded noisy stories with some of the scouts. The cook fussed over a pot.

Solas started to head into one of the men’s tents when he heard Helen say, “Solas, do you have a moment?”

Although she was on the opposite end of the camp, Helen had spoken using a normal tone of voice. It was not the first time she had spoken to him as an elf would. Most humans tended to raise their voices, either not knowing or not caring that elves had far superior hearing.

Solas joined them. He would have described the expression on Vivienne’s face as sad, had he believed her capable of any tender emotion.

Vivienne led the three of them into the alcove that took them out of the view of the camp, stopping along the way to retrieve a large package wrapped in silk imbued with a very powerful silencing enchantment.

The First Enchanter began to speak. “As I conversed with the rebel mages in Redcliffe today, I noticed a Tevinter trying to lure Clemence down to the docks. I intercepted them, and the Tevinter man fled.

“Then a young mage approached me. It was, of all the people, Connor, the Arl's son. He told me that dozens of Tranquil had arrived in Redcliffe with the rebel mages. Even before Alexius had ordered them gone, many started disappearing. Further proof, as if any were required, of Fiona's incompetence.

“At any rate, young Connor heard rumors that several Tranquil had last been seen entering a shack near the docks. I gained entrance to the shack. Inside, I found dozens of those oculara skulls and this tome.”
She unwrapped the package she had brought with her, carefully keeping the silk between her skin
and the large book she held. The leather cover had an embossed skull surrounded by beadwork embedded into it. Solas could hear the malicious whispers that emanated from the tome.

“This revolting book describes the process of sacrificing a Tranquil so that their skull might be used to find objects hidden by the Veil,” Vivienne said.
Helen tapped her wrist and scanned it. She looked at the results and shuddered. “Oh, god. Those beads are made from human teeth,” she said, horrified.

"No doubt they once belonged to Tranquil," Solas said.

Vivienne opened book and turned a few pages. “It is written in Tevene, and mentions Archon Davon, so the book is somewhat recent.” She closed the book and wrapped it back up in the silk. The whispering stopped.

Helen nodded. “I’ll send word to the advisors. Do either of you have any recommendations?”

"Find as many Tranquil as possible, and place them under the protection of the Inquisition," Vivienne said.

“And we should see if there is any pattern to the location of the oculara themselves,” Solas said. “We may gain some insight as to their purpose.”

Helen had opened up her omnitool again and was tapping out a letter. “Anything else?”

“Burn the skulls,” Vivienne said.

“I say study them. There may be something yet to learn, but do as you wish, Herald.”

Helen thanked them both and dismissed them, saying she would be out shortly.

Solas spent the rest of the evening half-hoping, half-dreading that Helen would speak to him. However, she spent the rest of her time occupied with Inquisition business. She was still reading reports when Solas retired for the night.

They left for Haven the following morning.

For the next few days, Solas waited for Helen to pull away, or to ask him about the trip to Redcliffe, or something. Instead, she treated him exactly as she always had.

Sera’s aversion to sharing a tent with Solas apparently extended to Madame de Fer, as well. So both mages shared a tent with Helen. Much as Solas disliked Vivienne, he was grateful for her presence at night. It kept him from giving in to the temptation to touch Helen.

Their third night out, Helen asked Solas and Vivienne if she could scan them.

“‘Scan us?’ I have no idea what you are talking about, my dear.”

Helen explained, "I have been studying the physiology of the different races on Thedas, and I’ve noticed something. Every elf and a handful of the humans that I’ve scanned have extra receptors in their nervous systems. Sometimes the receptors are active, sometimes not.

"I think it may have something to do with being a mage, but everybody I have scanned has either"
been dead or not a mage."

"Would this be like when you scanned me healing your hand?" Solas asked.

"This scan will be much broader. Not only will it take energy readings, but it also will look at your biology. Some people might not like how much information it gives. Here, I'll show you."

Helen activated her omnitool and began typing. Vivienne said nothing but watched the omnitool with a slight frown.

"Here are the readings on a human female corpse I scanned in the Fallow Mire," Helen said. "She had a terrible case of endometriosis. One of the side effects is infertility. This woman had never had any children. That might be unrelated to her medical condition. It may be that she did not want any, or that she had not tried for children yet. But if she had tried, she likely would have had difficulty conceiving."

Helen tapped on the omnitool again. Solas watched the text of her mother tongue scroll by so quickly, it was hard to believe she was taking in any information at all.

"Here we go," she said after a moment. "This man, a human male, had neuropathy in his feet, as well as cirrhosis of the liver. Likely, he was an alcoholic."

She closed the omnitool again. "So, that is what I mean about looking at your biology. Anything I learn, I will keep in confidence, but you may prefer that I not know at all."

"I would be happy to have you scan me, Herald, as long as I can see the results," Solas said. He knew he was in perfect health.

Would the esteemed Madame de Fer be as confident in her own history? What would it reveal, he wondered. Any hushed-up pregnancies? Addictions?

"You may scan me, as well, my dear."

"Thank you," Helen beamed at them. "Let's get started."

The spent most of the first Watch with Helen scanning them. She examined them as they cast neutral fields around themselves, both individually and at the same time. She studied both offensive and defensive magic.

For offensive magic, Vivienne placed her palm on the ground and froze a thin, straight line across the floor of the tent. Solas had to admit; he was impressed. Ice magic was easy to cast but hard to control. It wanted to crystallize whatever moisture was nearby. A careless spell would freeze not only your enemy but also your ally standing next to him.

Freezing the ground was just as hard. The moisture content of soil varied, and the magic wanted to spread.

Vivienne had kept her spell as straight as a tautly pulled thread. "Nicely done, Madame de Fer," Solas said, inclining his head. He then explained to Helen why Vivienne's spell was so impressive.

Solas chose something a bit esoteric for his own offensive spell. He created a twin hand from the Fade and projected it next to his own right hand. "If we were in battle," he explained, "I could make this as large as three men standing together."

As he opened and closed his right hand, the Veilhand opened and closed with him. "I can strike
down my enemies, or gouge out the ground around them, causing them to stumble."

"Could you pull an enemy to you, like that Revenant did to me?" Helen asked.

"In theory, but that maneuver is a waste for most mages," Solas said. "Why spend the energy on a spell, only to engage in a sword fight? Few mages are proficient with swords."

"When did you face a Revenant, of all the horrible things?" Vivienne asked.

“In the Fallow Mire,” Helen said. “I would have died if not for Solas.”

“You would not have been injured at all had your barrier been over yourself, instead of Sera and Bull.”

Helen just shrugged. “Speaking of barriers, I want to scan both of you casting one.”

What followed was the genuinely exquisite joy of watching a non-mage lecture Vivienne about the poor quality of her barrier. Vivienne did not take the criticism lightly, implying that, as Helen was not a mage, she did not understand magical barriers.

“It doesn’t matter that I’m not a mage, Vivienne. I know what barriers are, I’ve been casting them since I was a teenager. Here. Look.”

The omnitool showed everything in odd colors—magenta, cyan and yellow. The barrier itself looked black. “See? Look at those holes. You’re exposing your backside.”

By contrast, Solas’ barrier was so solid, he nearly disappeared from view on the scanner.

Helen asked them to cast their neutral fields while holding onto their staffs. They did, and she started giggling.

“Look how your nervous systems light up,” she said. Then she showed them the scan. Solas saw himself and Vivienne, in those odd colors, sitting cross-legged. As they each picked up their staves, it looked like bright water flowing throughout their bodies, in thousands of tiny, little streams.

Finally, she did a scan of the lyrium in Solas’ staff.

She frowned. She scanned Vivienne’s staff.

Her frown deepened.

“I thought lyrium was a mineral?” she asked.

“It is, darling.”

“No. It isn’t.”

Solas felt apprehensive. Helen had just made an unexpected, and potentially dangerous, discovery.

It was an almost universal misconception that lyrium was a mineral. Solas did not believe that even most of the modern dwarves who mined it knew otherwise. The few that did know had a financial incentive to keep the knowledge to themselves.

“What does your scanner say it is?” he asked.
“‘Unknown biosynthetic pathogen.’” She used her finger and thumb reverse-pinch the image she was looking at so that she could see it at the cellular level. It was, coincidentally, the same movement Solas used when he was using his magic to look more closely at something.

The omnitool showed tiny, six-sided columns, almost like quartz. Helen swore.

“Cursing in your own language is rarely a good sign,” Solas said. “What bothers you so?”

Helen pointed to the image of the lyrium cells. “Living cells are mostly water. This is a crystalline structure, with no water. One organism that can both survive without water and which organizes into a crystalline shape when it is inactive is a virus.”

“I am unfamiliar with that term.”

“An infectious agent. It inserts itself into living cells and using the cell’s energy and resources to reproduce. It can be something as mild as the common cold or as virulent as a pandemic.”

Solas pointed to the image on the screen. “And you believe that is a virus?”

"I don't know. It's pretty big for a virus, but it has a similar structure. Does it grow on its own?"

"Yes," they both said.

Helen shook her head. "Maybe not a virus, then. Mages and templars consume this, on purpose?"

“A more refined form of it, yes.”

“Will the lyrium in the staves make either of you sick?”

They both gave her a look. “Not unless we eat it, no,” Vivienne said.

Helen was tapping her fingers all over the haptic interface. The screen flickered through multiple images that Solas neither recognized nor understood.

She muttered, “Biosynthetic, biosynthetic. Created for what, exactly?”

“Hey, Boss?” Bull’s voice was just outside the tent. “It’s your watch.”

“Be right there,” she called out, turning off her omnitool. She turned back to Vivienne and Solas. “Thank you, both of you, for allowing me to do this. I appreciate your patience.”

“Of course, darling. It was a most enlightening experience.”

“I am at your disposal, Herald.”

She smiled at them both and then left the tent.

Vivienne and Solas looked at each other, both wearing serious expressions on their faces.

“Andraste save us,” Vivienne said quietly. “As if her biotics weren’t alarming enough, now she has that thing on her wrist. Can you imagine what would have happened if a member of the Mining Caste had overheard her saying that about lyrium? What secrets will she accidentally uncover with that thing?”

“She is a former military officer. I do not think she will go blurtling out the color of the Empress’ smallclothes,” Solas said, "but you are correct. What looks to her like an interesting scientific
“I will speak to her tomorrow,” Vivienne said firmly, “and impress upon her the need to conceal such information in public.”

Solas wanted to do the same, although perhaps he would let Vivienne do it first.

They got into their bedrolls. Vivienne extinguished the lamp with a wave of her hand.

“I didn’t believe she was from another world, you know. Not until a few days ago,” she said.

Then she sighed. “I have not asked her about her own world. I am almost afraid to do so. It is quite a thing, Solas, to get to be my age and learn there is still so much I don’t know.”

"Yes," Solas agreed, after a moment. "It is."

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY!!

Many thanks, as always, to my amazing and patient betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. Every chapter gets a little more complicated than the last and they have both been indispensable in keeping the lore from spilling over and running around like toddlers without diapers.

And we have another gorgeous and perfect render from ProcrastiKate! Her ability (and willingness) to render scenes that can't be found in-game bring so much to this story.

I am very grateful to all three of them for the time and effort they take from their own, very busy, lives.

Finally, thank you so much to all of you who are reading and reviewing and leaving kudos and comments. I appreciate your patience in between chapters. RL has been keeping me busier than usual. I am not always able to respond to your comments right away, but I will try to respond to them all, you know, eventually. (If I've missed yours, let me know and I'll respond)
Chapter thirty-eight

Chapter Summary

Helen finally confronts Leliana.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter thirty-eight

The following morning, Vivienne rode next to Helen and lectured her about being indiscreet with
the omnitool and what it could reveal. “One never knows whom one might offend with its
information, my dear.” “The last thing the Inquisition can afford right now is a diplomatic
incident.” And so on.

Helen listened for about five minutes, then said, “I appreciate you bringing your concerns to my
attention, Vivienne, but I did undercover and infiltration work for years. I know how to protect
sensitive information.”

Vivienne pressed her lips together in disapproval. Before she could respond, Solas joined them.
“Madame de Fer’s concerns are well-founded,” he said, as he launched into the same damn lecture.

He was more pedantic about it, certainly. Instead of sugar-coating his point in “darlings” and “my
dears,” Solas delivered it in a rhythm that spoke of practiced forethought.

“Herald, I understand your military background gives you an appreciation for confidential
information. However, not all knowledge need be private or personal to be dangerous. Many will
view your scientific insights into Thedas as a direct threat.”

Helen looked at him for a moment. “That has always been the way with science.”

“And I encourage you to continue your search for the answers to such questions. Nevertheless,
Vivienne is correct—you would be wise to discuss your findings with someone you trust prior to
any other disclosures about what you learn.”

Vivienne inclined her head regally and said, “I offer my counsel should you ever need it, darling.”

“And I offer mine, as well, Herald.”

Vivienne gave a skeptical little cough. “I am sure that, should the Herald need any advice about
outdoor living, she will happily come to you. I, however, have been at court. This gives me a - no
offense, my dear Solas - far more useful perspective to offer.”

“The issues of Thedas extend well beyond the Orlesian court!” Solas snapped.

Vivienne and Solas, having delivered their joint concern, fell into the bickering that Helen
suspected was a permanent feature of their interactions.
Twenty minutes of sniping later, her omnitool announced that the genetic sequencing of both Solas and Vivienne was complete. Helen lifted her right wrist and said, “File under IDGAF.”

“Acknowledged.”

She would look at it later, when she was less inclined to holler, “IT SAYS HERE YOU BOTH INHERITED THE BITCH GENE. OH SORRY! DID I SAY THAT OUT LOUD?”

Helen knew she was feeling petty. She also knew it had far more to do with Solas’ visit to the brothel than the fact that he had scolded her.

But she had no reason to be angry with Solas. She had no right to expect him to change his worldview in the short time he had known her.

She would endeavour to treat Solas with friendship and respect, and let go of any pointless hope about... whatever it was she thought might have been growing between the two of them.

**

The ground team arrived in Haven the following night, long after sundown. After stabling the horses, Helen said her goodbyes to Sera, Bull, Solas, and Vivienne. She was pleased to see the lamps burning in her cabin.

A quick wash, then bed. She was exhausted.

She opened the door to find Leliana standing in the middle of her cabin, arms folded across her chest.

Well, fuck.

“Do we have to do this now, Leliana?”

“‘Let the spymaster know that she and I will need to speak privately as soon as I arrive back in Haven,’” Leliana said, quoting Helen’s own letter back to her. “Those were your exact words.”

Helen shook her head, closed the door and brushed past Leliana. After dropping her pack on the floor, she put the kettle on the fire. Only then did she turn to face Leliana again.

“You’ve lied to me from the beginning,” Helen said, as she began unstrapping her armor. “Tell me why.”

Leliana, in short, clipped tones, told Helen that she thought the omnitool might have been responsible for the Conclave explosion. She had it sent off for testing. Eventually, her expert determined that it was non-magical and sent it back.

“And then you kept it from me.”

“I needed the leverage over you,” Leliana said.

“Leverage,” Helen repeated.

“Nobody can easily counteract your biotics. You have no family or loved ones that can be threatened to make you comply. There’s no political pressure to exert upon you, no embarrassing past to exploit.”

Leliana gestured towards Helen, who was shucking off her greaves. “You remove your armor in
my presence with no concern for your safety. So, yes. I needed the leverage.”

Helen rolled her eyes. “As long as the Breach remains, you won’t harm me. If nothing else, you do want to save your own planet.”

“And after the Breach is closed?” Leliana asked. “Would you feel so safe in front of me then?”

“Yes.”

Helen, now down to her underthings, stacked her armor on a shelf. She rummaged through the wardrobe until she found plain, white cotton panties, and a white, flannel nightgown. Bless you, Josie. You’re still my favorite.

The kettle had started to steam. Helen stripped off the last of her clothing, poured hot water into the basin, lathered a flannel, and began to wash.

“You know I will close the Breach,” Helen said. “However, I see no reason why I have to be the one who negotiates with the mages or Templars, or runs Inquisition errands all over Ferelden.

“I had been willing to do so because I’d thought the Inquisition was treating me with good faith. Now?” Helen shrugged and bent forward at the waist to pour water over her head. “The Villa has better food and indoor plumbing. Pick a side, and send for me when they arrive.”

“No. It has to be you,” Leliana said with no small amount of bitterness. “The Inquisition doesn’t have enough power yet to be able to persuade anybody without you.”

“Not my problem, Spymaster,” Helen said as she reached for a towel and began to rub it across her head.

Helen finished the rest of her cleaning routine in silence, waiting to see if Leliana would call her bluff.

Leliana said nothing. Finally clean, Helen clad herself in the panties and nightgown, then got into her bed. “If you have anything to add, do it now. Otherwise, I will see you at the debrief tomorrow.”

Leliana sighed, “We found your ship.”

“Oh, sure you did. If you think I’m going to believe you now, you’re sadly--” Leliana handed her a piece of folded paper.

Helen opened it up. There, in unsteady Roman alphanumerics:

“HEEV SC-A619”


“I know you said not to approach the ship because it might be leaking poison, but one of my scouts is very quick with a pencil,” Leliana said. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It’s a serial number,” Helen said quietly. “Every Ark had four thousand escape pods. This one was assigned to the Hyperion’s Security division. When did you find it?”

“Ten days ago. Cullen and Josie don’t know yet. I wanted to be the one to tell you.”

Helen looked up from the paper. “And is its location your new leverage?”
“No. It’s located at the bottom of a ravine about a day’s journey from here. There’s been some
snowmelt recently, and it slid down the mountainside. Whenever you’re ready, Charter will
arrange a team to take you there.” She handed Helen a map, showing the location of the escape
pod.

“Thank you,” Helen said, staring at the map.

Lelina frowned. “I thought you would be more excited about having your ship back.”

“It isn’t really a ship,” Helen explained. “It can’t go anywhere under its own power. Still, between
the pod and my cryo unit, there may be enough security logs and news feeds that I can find out
what went wrong here in Andromeda.”

Leliana was quiet for a long moment. Then, moving so quickly that it startled Helen, the Spymaster
dropped to the floor and pulled a small, wooden crate out from under Helen’s bed.

It was full of wine bottles. Leliana hoisted the crate onto the table.

“I need a drink,” she said. She took off her gloves and carelessly threw them onto a chair.

“Why is there a crate of wine under my bed?” Helen asked.

“Because they’re yours,” Leliana began rummaging through the box, looking at labels. “People all
across Thedas are hearing about us, about you. Even a minor diplomatic inquiry usually comes
with some sort of token.”

“Should I scan them for poison?” Helen asked.

Leliana looked offended. “Do you really think I would allow them anywhere near you if I had not
already checked? Give me some credit, Herald.”

Helen got out of bed, and grabbed two mugs from a shelf. Leliana fished a corkscrew from the
crate, opened a bottle and poured a cherry-red wine into the cups. Berries and citrus scented the air.
They sat at the table.

“This is a Rivaini fortified red,” Leliana explained, as she took a swallow from her mug. “A bit
sweet, and stronger than it tastes.”

Helen took a sip. “Very tasty,” she said.

Leliana took another, much longer, drink, then squinted at Helen. “Do you know how odd you
sound? How little sense you make sometimes? ‘Here in Andromeda.’ ‘Cryo units’ and ‘news
feeds.’ Your printed letters. Everything about you is bizarre.”

“How do you think Thedas looks to me?” Helen replied. “Magic, demons, and possession are fairy
tales and horror stories in my world. Not to mention this,” she said holding up her left hand, the
mark clearly visible.

“The omnitool tells me it’s an ‘unknown plasma.’ Most plasmas are so hot that it would have
burned my hand to a crisp. Tech plasmas are much cooler, but have to be artificially contained.
Either way, everything I know about the world tells me this cannot exist.”

Leliana stared at Helen for a long moment, then took another drink. “As I said, you’re bizarre. Can
you blame me for sending your bracelet off for testing?”
Leliana’s question triggered something in Helen’s memory, and she turned on the haptic interface.

Leliana spluttered a bit on the wine she was swallowing but recovered quickly. “Warn a girl, Herald.”

Helen scrolled through the security files that had been recorded after the Conclave explosion.

“One of the security features of my omnitool is that it will passively record any attempt to break into it,” Helen said. She found the first post-Conclave video and hit “play.”

The face of an intense young dwarf floated above the omnitool, and said, “You are just not giving up your secrets, are you?”

“Dagna!” Leliana said, astounded.

“Who’s Dagna?”

“The arcanist I sent the omnitool to for testing. I’ve known her for years. She’s brilliant. Mad, but brilliant.”

The omnitool was recording that it was being subjected to an electromagnetic field. Dagna looked away as if she were making notes. “Let’s try this, then,” and the strength of the field increased. Dagna shook her head. “Still nothing.” She sounded delighted at that fact, and turned the strength of the field up even higher.

There were several clips of Dagna cheerfully subjecting the omnitool to various tests. She wore giant goggles in one vid, and appeared to be fishing the omnitool out of boiling water.

Leliana giggled but Helen was quietly horrified. The Savant BIO omnitool had been hardcoded to her DNA. Nobody could access it without Helen’s permission.

But Dagna could have ruined it, had she tried hard enough, or run the wrong test.

The last vid of Dagna ended. The next one was several weeks later.

She hit play.

It was Solas’ face, lit by campfire, as he held the omnitool at arm’s length and frowned at it. His other hand, bathed in green light, passed over the omnitool. He brought it closer to his face and studied it, turning it over and over in his hands. The camera caught glimpses of his wrapped feet and a campsite.

Then he tucked it back into the jawbone pendant, and the recording ended.

“I hear you and Solas have grown quite close,” Leliana said, watching Helen carefully.

Close. Yes, that was both fair, and fairly vague. “We have,” Helen agreed.

“You’re sharing a tent now,” Leliana said.

“At times.”

“Did he tell you he visited the brothel in Redcliffe?”

“No, he didn’t.” Technically, Sera had told her.
“Well, he did. Do you know how I know that?”

“One of your creepy ravens works there?”

This actually made Leliana laugh out loud. “In a way. The madam is an agent of mine.”

Helen nodded. “Your network sounds extensive.”

“It is. It needs improvement, of course, but then, what doesn’t?” Leliana took a sip. “Does it bother you, knowing he went there?”

Yes.

“If I’d pitched a fit every time a member of my ground team blew off a little steam, I’d have had a miserable time running combat missions.”

“Hmmm,” Leliana looked Helen directly in the eyes. “Do you want to know what he did at the brothel?”

Helen met Leliana’s gaze. “Does the Inquisition’s Spymaster want me to know?”

“Yes,” Leliana said. “Do you remember those elves you rescued from the slavers?”

Helen had to think for a moment. It seemed so long ago. “Artisans, right? Captured on the road?”

Leliana nodded. “That’s right. They were from Redcliffe, actually. One of them, an older woman, had acted as their spokesperson.”

“I remember,” Helen said. “She was suspicious of us until she saw Cassandra.”

“Yes. Now she’s a maid at the whorehouse in the alienage. Solas went there and spoke with her. She told my agent that he was there to check on the welfare of her and the other elves who had not been able to secure employment within the Inquisition.”

Helen took a deep drink of wine, then sat back in her chair. “Really.”

“Why does this surprise you?”

“Because, as much as Solas goes on and on about the flaws of every race on Thedas - and he does, at length - he saves his strongest criticism for elves. The Dalish are ‘children.’ Alienage elves are ‘servile.’ No topic seems to frustrate him more.”

Leliana gave her a wicked smile. “Oh, I know one topic that frustrates him more.”

“Which is?”

“You, of course.”

Helen let out a little impatient huff, and would not look at Leliana.

“The madam had no idea who he was,” Leliana said. “She’d never seen him before, and his request
to speak with the maid was odd. Not the oddest thing she’s ever seen, obviously, but still. It stood out.

“But which seems more likely to you? An apostate hermit goes to a whorehouse to check on the welfare of an old woman he’d rescued several months before?”

“It’s plausible,” Helen interrupted.

“Has he done it before?”

“Not that I know of,” Helen admitted.

“Or,” Leliana said, pouring more wine into Helen’s mug as she continued her argument, “a lonely elf goes to an alienage brothel to forget the human he’s so attracted to, only to find he has no interest once he gets there?”

“So, talking to the woman was just, what - a cover story?”

The redhead shrugged. “You know that Bull sends intelligence reports to the Qun. He’s kept his promise not to let them know about the omnitool until the advisors have seen it, by the way. Just thought you’d like to know.

“Anyway, Bull also sends reports to me. Do you know what he tells me?”

“How big his boner is when he kills a giant?”

Leliana gave a throaty laugh. “There’s a conversation for another time, but no. What Bull tells me is that Solas is falling in love with you.”

Helen opened her mouth, then shut it again, trapping all of the angry words that had nearly spilled out. She took a breath. You don’t get to be offended that the spy was spying on you. He told you as much when you hired him.

“Why is Bull telling you this?” Helen asked, as calmly as she could.

Leliana went from gossipy to lethal in an instant. “Because it’s a potential weakness to be used against you. Against us. If somebody were to take Solas hostage, what would you do to rescue him?”

“I killed everything in the Fallow Mire to rescue a group of people I’d never met,” Helen pointed out.

“That’s fair,” Leliana conceded. “But what if you were asked to do something less noble to save him? Would you?”

“Would I betray the Inquisition, you mean,” Helen said.

“Yes.”

“I can’t give you the answer you want to hear, Leliana. I don’t know what your goals are, beyond closing the Breach. I don’t really even know what my own role in the Inquisition is supposed to be.

“You call me ‘Herald,’ but that’s not a formal title. I don’t have a military rank. I don’t get paid. I have personal loyalties to some people in the Inquisition, but not to the Inquisition itself.”

Helen drained her mug of wine. “As for Solas, you’re just looking for new leverage.”
“Maybe,” Leliana admitted, pouring more wine for Helen, “although I wasn’t lying about what Bull said. He wrote that Solas’ eyes, quote, ‘follow the Herald unless his attention is focused on battle or the Fade,’ unquote.”

Bet he’d hate to hear that about himself.

“Why are you telling me this, Leliana?”

“It’s my job to know my people, and I’m beginning to realize I don’t know you at all. Besides, you can’t blame a girl for being curious. Solas isn’t exactly hard on the eyes. How do you feel about him?”

“Ask Bull.” Helen drank more of the wine Leliana had just poured.

“I did. He says you’re quite fond of Solas, and respect him a great deal, but that you aren’t lovers.”

Helen nodded. “All of that is true.”

“He also says you’re hard to read.”

Helen just shrugged. “Sounds like he’s reading me just fine.”

Leliana snorted a little. “Maker, you’re good at this.”

“This isn’t my first fishing expedition, Leliana.”

“No. I suppose it isn’t. So,” she said, changing topics, “besides Dagna’s pretty face, what else will that thing show us tomorrow?”

“What happened at the Conclave.”

Leliana’s smile faded. “What do you mean?”

“Everything from me leaving my escape pod to the moment you removed my omnitool in the Chantry dungeon.”

“How long have you known this?”

“Since the day after Solas returned my omnitool to me.”

Leliana went utterly still.

“Am I to understand,” her voice sounded like a knife dropped on the floor, “that you’ve known what happened at the Conclave for weeks and you didn’t immediately tell us?”

Helen felt her mouth drop open.

“Why would you do that?” Leliana continued, her tone accusatory. “Worried about what we’ll see? Or did you just want a little more tent time with Solas?”

“Are you fucking serious?” A wave of astonished fury hit Helen so hard that she had to stand up and pace, lest she physically strike Leliana.

“One of the very first things I ever told you was that my omnitool may have recorded the explosion! If you had just given it to me, I could have shown you everything - everything! - the day I woke up.
“The Conclave. Where I came from! How I got here! All of it is here, and all of it could have been known to you before supper, that very first night here in Haven.” Helen’s biotics involuntarily flared around her hands, her anger almost getting the best of her. “Every single time I came back to Haven, I asked if you’d found it. And every single time, you not only lied to me, you kept sending me back out there!” Helen exclaimed, pointing at the door.

Barely suppressed rage had thickened her accent, and her biotics flickered over her entire body, bathing her in eerie, blue light. “Four months, Leliana. Four months! And you wonder why I have no loyalty towards the Inquisition?”

As Helen paced, Leliana had moved her hands. One was palm down next to her mug, while the other was hidden under the table.

She’s afraid of me. The realization brought no satisfaction. It only reminded her of just how exhausted she really was.

Only slightly calmer, Helen reined in her biotics and sat down at the table again.

“I’ll tell you true, Spymaster,” Helen spat the title like it was the worst insult. “When I first saw the recording, I considered returning to Haven and showing it to all of you. But that would have added weeks to my ground missions.

“Everybody at the Conclave is dead. Rescuing soldiers and closing rifts saves the living. If watching the dead die was more important to you, you should have said something. But you didn’t. So I made my own judgment call.

“And if you don’t like it, fuck off.” She stared at Leliana over the rim of her mug as she drank.

Leliana dropped her gaze to her own mug. A long, long, awkward silence followed. Helen was not going to break it. This was Leliana’s mistake to fix.

Finally, Leliana quietly asked, “What did happen at the Conclave?”

Helen deflated a bit. The Conclave, on the other hand, was not Leliana’s mistake. It was her own.

“You’ll probably understand it better than I do, when you see it. I interrupted something, a ritual of some sort. Do you remember that voice at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, the one that said, ‘Keep the sacrifice still?’”

Leliana nodded.

“Justinia was the sacrifice, and the voice belonged to a man,” Helen continued. “Although he was so badly deformed, I don’t know if he could even still be considered human.

“Anyway, I interrupted whatever it was he was trying to do. He was holding an orb. When I walked into the room, Justinia knocked it out of his hand. It bounced my way and like a fool, I reached for it. It attached itself to my hand. I screamed my head off, then everything exploded. Justinia and I were both blown into the Fade.

“I was knocked unconscious. Justinia found me. She got me up and moving. We were being chased. She located a rift. She could have gone through it, and escaped. Instead, she sacrificed herself to get me through.” Saying it out loud still made Helen’s eyes water.

“She would,” Leliana whispered. “That sounds very much like her.”
“I am sorry, Leliana,” Helen said. “I won’t lie, I’m angry at you. But I am sorry about Justinia and everybody else who died. I am sorry for the part I played in all of this. I know it doesn’t mean much now, but I never wanted any of this.”

“I believe you,” Leliana responded, “but I wish I didn’t. It was easier when I thought you were lying to us all.”

The Spymaster drained the last of her wine, and stood up. “Well,” she said, as she took another bottle of wine for herself, “tomorrow should be interesting. I will inform the others about the recording. Good night, Herald.”

Leliana had made it all the way to the front door, when Helen called out, “Leliana?”

The Spymaster looked back at Helen, who held up her left hand. The mark glowed faintly green, as it always did this close to the Breach.

“This is the only leverage you ever needed.”

Leliana held her gaze for a long moment. Then she nodded once, and left.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

My betas really need to take a bow for this chapter. It took a while to get the convo with Leliana and Helen right, and they both gave me tons of feedback about it.

Also, a minor housekeeping matter. I’m working well-ahead on the story plot and realized I had a math problem for what I have planned, so had to go back and add a few hundred years to when Helen arrival on Thedas.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading, leaving kudos and reviews! I appreciate you all very much.

UPDATE: ProcrastiKate decided to knock herself out and give us a lovely render of Leliana and Helen!!! THANK YOU, PROCRASTIKATE!
Chapter thirty-nine

Cullen sat in his tent wearing breeches and tunic, re-reading the report in his hand for the fifth or sixth time. His head ached. Words lost their meaning as soon as he read them.

It was late, well into the Second Watch. For the last couple of weeks, he had stopped writing in his journal in favor of the ever-growing list of reports and paperwork that required his attention.

“Cullen?” Leliana’s quiet voice was just outside his tent.

“Come in.”

She did, with a bottle of wine in her hands.

Leliana’s deception regarding the whereabouts of the omnitool had upset both Cassandra and Josephine.

As a result, Leliana had been on the outs with her two closest friends.

Everybody was still remarkably civil, of course. These were not women who would allow grudges to get in the way of what they needed to accomplish.

But even he could tell that the distance hurt Leliana. Cullen, feeling a bit guilty that his tattling had gotten her in trouble with Cass and Josie, had started speaking with her more often. He’d quickly learned that, for all of her skill and intellect, Leliana struggled with as many insecurities as the rest of them. More, even.

And now that the Herald and her ground team had returned, Leliana had set out to mend some fences. Cullen suspected she was doing it to get back into the good graces of her friends, as she didn’t seem especially fond of the Herald herself.

“Well?” he asked. “How did it go?”

“Tell me you have a corkscrew.”

Cullen fished out his pocket knife and handed it to her. Within moments, the wine was open, and he had his knife back.

Leliana drank straight from the bottle. Cullen raised his eyebrows but said nothing. She tipped the bottle towards him. He waved it off. His headache was severe enough already.
“I’ve made a terrible mistake,” she said quietly, staring at the bottle.

Cullen waited.

“I didn’t want to believe her,” Leliana said. “But she’s so convinced of who she is and where she comes from that it’s hard to be skeptical when she’s here.”

He nodded in agreement.

“But she isn’t ever here, is she?” Leliana asked rhetorically. “Everything she says sounds like nonsense when she’s gone.”

Cullen remained silent and let her vent. This was not the first time Leliana had expressed disbelief about the Herald’s origins. She was wrong in this instance, but for the most part, the Inquisition had been well-served by Leliana’s skepticism.
"I decided that, at best, she was deluded. At worst, she was a phenomenal liar," she continued.

"Her printed letters decided it for me. She was a liar. She had to be. I told myself that only a very, very clever enchantment could do that while still escaping Dagna’s detection."

Leliana sighed, picking at the label on the wine bottle. “But then my scouts found her ship.”

“What?” Cullen asked. “When?”

“Ten days ago. Oh, don’t look at me like that. It isn’t going anywhere. Cassandra and Josie are already mad at me, and I needed to offer the Herald something on my own. For all the good it did.”

"She wasn't happy to hear about her ship? She certainly asked after it enough."

Leliana took another swig from the bottle. “Not really. She explained what it was, and why she wanted to get to it. You know how she sounds when she talks about her world, it’s just bizarre.

“But it wasn’t like her bracelet. She doesn’t care about the ship itself, only the information it might have. It wasn’t the peace offering I thought it would be.”

“Well, that’s a shame, I suppose, but that hardly seems like a terrible mistake.”

“It wasn’t. My terrible mistake was not giving her that damned bracelet as soon as Dagna returned it.”

Leliana recounted everything for him, starting with her failed attempt to get the Herald to warm up over wine, to the recounting of what had happened at the Conclave.

Cullen only interrupted once, upset that the Herald had not told them about the Conclave explosion as soon as she’d seen it.

“That was my reaction, too,” Leliana said. “Maker, Cullen, I’ve never seen her so angry. She pointed out that she could have shown us everything the day she woke up. But that I had held on to
it for months, while still sending her out into the field. She said if watching the dead die was more important than saving the living, I should have said something sooner.”

Leliana kept drinking as she recounted her tale, but she stayed sober enough to tell him had happened at the Conclave.

Maker.

Blood magic. The explosion. The Fade. Justinia’s sacrifice. The longer the story went on, the more nightmarish it became.

“And then, at the end of it all,” Leliana said, now stretched out on Cullen’s cot, “she apologized to me. Said she was sorry for her role in Justinia’s death.

“So there you have it. Evidence of the greatest crime ever committed against the Chantry sat in my strong box for months, while I convinced myself that the only witness was a liar and a fraud. How do you like our chances now, Cullen?”

The empty wine bottle dangled from her fingertips, and her eyes were bloodshot and heavy.

“None of us wanted to believe her,” he said.

“You believed her well enough. You even gave the omnitool back to her.”

Watching Leliana angry, sad, or upset was one thing. Watching her despair was something else entirely.

“No. You’re not allowed to do this.”

She gave him a baleful glare. "Not allowed to do what? Beat myself up?"

“Oh, by all means, feel free to do that,” he said blithely. “Maker knows nobody else has the balls to do it for you.”

He stood up and reached a hand towards her. “You’re not allowed to pass out in my tent. I don’t have anywhere else to sleep.”

Leliana’s lips twitched. “Fine,” she sighed dramatically. She took his hand and hoisted herself off the cot. She fished a restoration potion from one of her pockets and drank it down quickly. Her eyes cleared just a bit, and her posture straightened. It would at least get her to her quarters without looking like a complete sot.

She looked at his desk, with its small mountain of papers. “I don’t understand why you don’t just take up Josie’s offer of an assistant or two,” she nagged. “You have other things to do.”

“Yes. Like sleep.”

Leliana shrugged one shoulder and dropped the subject. ”Right, then. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Leliana.”

With the Spymaster gone, Cullen sighed as he looked at the reports on his desk. Giving it all up as a bad job, he doused his candle and went to bed.

**
Cullen left his tent long before sunrise the next morning. As he walked to the Chantry, he heard the Herald's distinctive voice call his name. He looked to his left and saw her leaving her quarters.

She jogged to catch up with him. “Good morning, Commander.”

“Good morning, Herald. Welcome back.”

“I wanted to thank you again for returning my omnitool to me,” she said, as she fell into step with him. “It was a kindness I will not forget.”

“Oh. Ah, you’re welcome,” he said, unsure how he felt about it now, having spoken with Leliana last night.

They continued towards the Chantry in awkward silence. He didn’t do small talk well, and he barely knew the Herald. So he was more than a little grateful when she said, "Tell me how your recruits are coming along."

The topic carried them all the way to the back of the Chantry, where they heard muffled but angry voices coming from behind the closed door of the War Room.

The Herald sighed and opened the door without knocking.

Leliana, Cassandra, and Josephine stopped mid-argument.

Cassandra reached out to shake the Herald’s hand. “Herald,” she said, “it is good you have returned. And I apologize. We were just discussing Leliana’s…”

“Deception?” Josie said. “You should have told us about the ship!”

The Herald closed the door behind her. “Peace, everyone. Leliana wanted to tell me first. As I am the only one who can repair it safely anyway, there was no harm done. Hello, Josie.”

The Ambassador rushed over to embrace the Herald. “Helen! I am so glad you are back! We have been so worried about you!”

Cullen rolled his eyes. He had not been worried about the Herald. She was a soldier, for Maker’s sake, not a child.

Once everyone had taken their places around the War Table, Helen asked, “Did Leliana tell you all about the Conclave explosion?”

Everybody nodded. Cassandra said, “You should have told us about it right away.”

“I agree,” Cullen chimed in. “Maker only knows what sort of opportunities we’ve lost because of your delay.”

The Herald might have lost her temper with Leliana the night before, but this morning she was entirely unruffled.

“I told all of you, from the very beginning, that the omnitool might have recorded the Conclave. Cassandra, I discussed it with you many times while we were on the road.

“Returning to Haven would have added weeks to my ground missions. I had rifts to close and soldiers to rescue. Left to my own devices, I prioritized the living over the dead.”

Something about her calm certitude needled Cullen. “You couldn’t send a raven?” he asked.
“I could have, yes. I chose not to. I won’t pretend to fully understand what I witnessed, but even I recognize a political disaster when I see it. Ravens can be intercepted. There is a Qunari spy on my ground team. I didn’t want this information in his hands before it was in yours.”

“What’s done is done,” Josephine said. “Arguing about it changes nothing. We should move on to more productive topics.”

After a few heartbeats of silence, where nobody said anything else, the Herald spoke.

“Right. Let’s get started. First, the omnitool.” The Herald held out her arm. The bracelet sat on her wrist, and she tapped it.

Cullen, Cassandra, and Josie all jumped a bit as the Herald’s entire forearm was suddenly covered in strange, orange armor. She gave them no time at all to adjust to the sight before she launched into an explanation.

“This part here is the interface. It's made of what we call 'hard light.' It responds to my touch, but if I turn it off,” she did just that, “the omnitool can still respond to my voice commands, or to external stimuli.”

Cullen watched as the Herald explained her omnitool.

“Most basic models can hold the equivalent of several thousand libraries. Mine has over 10 million books, articles, and publications.”

The Herald continued speaking, clearly at home with the subject matter.

“It can act as a weapon, depending on how it’s used. There’s a blade function on mine, but combat engineers use theirs for shorting out an enemy’s armor, or for combat drones…”

She would turn it on and off as she talked. Every time she did, Cullen jumped.

“Then there’s my tactical cloak.” She went tap tap tap and vanished from sight.

While the rest of the advisors gasped, Cullen found his hand on the pommel of his sword.

Her tin-on-gravel voice just kept talking, right where it had been. “The cloak holds until I turn it off, or until something breaks it.” Then she re-appeared. "Questions?" she asked.

“Do you have more of them?” Leliana asked. “On your ship, perhaps?”

The Herald shook her head. “I doubt it. They were never standard equipment on escape pods. Too expensive.”

Leliana and Cassandra asked her other questions, but Cullen found himself fighting the rising panic in his gut and the throbbing behind his eyeballs. He ached for lyrium. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down.

After answering questions, the Herald pointed to her head. "My actual memory of the Conclave explosion has not returned. But I have watched the recording twice.

"I won't lie. It's shocking to witness. I know you all want answers, but I think we should handle other matters first, so nothing important gets forgotten."

“We should watch it now,” Cassandra said. “What we see might affect every decision we make from this point forward.”
“Agreed,” Leliana said.

“Bad enough we’ve waited this long,” Cullen muttered, still not entirely in control of his own emotions.

Josie only said, “I would defer to your judgment, Herald.”

The Herald sighed. “It’s long. Even if I skip past the unnecessary parts, it will take the rest of the morning. And it’s loud. If you have a place where we won’t be overheard and won’t be interrupted, we should go there.”

“Downstairs, then,” Leliana said.

The Herald’s eyebrow twitched up just a bit. “The dungeon?”

“When Haven was restored several years ago, silencing runes were woven into the stone downstairs,” Cassandra said. “It is one of many reasons why the Inquisition decided to use Haven as its base of operations.”

The Herald frowned but said nothing as they filed out of the War Room.

Leliana posted a scout at the door that led into the cellar, with instructions that nobody else come through unless it was an advisor or the Herald. Then she led them downstairs into a small, messy office.

The Herald sat down at the desk, tapped the omnitool on (Cullen managed not to jump this time) and spoke to it in her language.

Then the omnitool said, “Acknowledged.”

“Who was that?” Cassandra demanded.

"It's a 'what,' not a 'who.' It's just the omnitool. I switched its default language to the Common and added subtitles to the recording. It will make it easier for all of you to understand what happened."

She tapped the omnitool a few more times, rested her arms on the desktop, and said, “Begin playback.”

It took a moment for Cullen to understand what they were watching - it was the Herald’s point of view as she trekked through ice and snow at night. After a few moments, they heard a disembodied voice speak:

“Warning. The ambient temperature is below recommended levels. Please seek shelter immediately.”

The Herald said something in the recording. The subtitles read, “No shit. How far to the navpoint?”

The Herald spoke over the recording. "When my pod dropped through the atmosphere, it identified the Temple of Sacred Ashes as the nearest shelter and marked its location. That’s why I was headed there.”

“Element zero levels in your system have exceeded safe parameters for human physiology. Please vacate to the nearest medical station and seek treatment.”

"It goes on like this for quite some time. If anybody wants to see it all, let me know. But for now, we can skip it." The Herald pressed her forefinger on something. The recording sped up, making it
look like the Herald was running up the mountain.

The Herald began normal playback at a point where she crested a hill. There, still intact and beautiful, was the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

In the recording, the Herald tapped her right wrist, and the voice said, "Tactical cloak engaged."

“This right here,” the Herald pointed to the recording of her opening a backdoor to the Temple, “is the last real memory I have.”

It was hard, watching the Herald pass those people in the Temple. They were guards and servants, Templars and mages, some of whom Cullen had known. Leliana, Cassandra, and Josephine all softly exclaimed as they saw friends of theirs, soon to die in the horrors to come.

The omnitool had also recorded how rapidly the Herald deteriorated. She walked in circles and muttered to herself about water fountains. The disembodied voice kept intoning her medical problems to her. Cullen felt his palms sweat as she descended further and further into the Temple.

They heard Divine Justinia cry out for help.

The Herald opened the door.


It was the Grey Wardens. Divine Justinia was being held captive by Grey Wardens.

A ghoulish mage, freakishly tall and deformed by red lyrium, held an orb in his hand as he prepared the blood magic ritual.

The Herald’s tactical cloak vanished. The mage looked over at her, shock written all over his ugly face. The Herald yelled something, which the subtitles translated as, "What’s going on?"

"Kill the intruder," the mage said.

Justinia knocked the orb out of his hand. The Herald reached for it, as if by instinct. It fused itself to her left hand.

The Herald had inhaled sharply, and then she’d screamed. The terror and fury in her voice caused every hair on Cullen’s body to stand on end.

The explosion that followed must have caused the omnitool to quit working. The projection stuttered, then resolved in the Fade, the Herald unconscious.

Divine Justinia found her, woke her, and helped her stand. The Herald had asked questions, but of course, Justinia had not understood. Still, the Divine tried to lead them out of the Fade.

Fearlings found them.

The Herald had panicked at whatever the fearlings looked like to her, chanting, "Please-no-not-the-Geth, please-no-not-the-Geth."

Justinia had reached the rift first. Then she sacrificed herself for the Herald. "Warn them," had been her last words.

The Herald fell through through the Rift. Cullen had not realized how long a drop it was. She
cracked her skull on the ground, and the omnitool resumed blaring warnings about her dire medical condition.

Justinia’s spirit watched the Herald for a moment before the rift closed.

“You all know happened after that,” the Herald said, stopping the playback.

The Grey Wardens. The fucking Grey Wardens. Cullen was going to find Blackwall and demand answers right now. He was going to -

“That. Little. Shit!”

They all looked at Cassandra.

“Who?” Leliana asked.

“Varric! He claimed that he and the Champion had killed him! I should have known he was lying. He always lies! And like a fool, I believed him!”

“Killed who?” the Herald asked.

“That darkspawn magister!” Cassandra waved at omnitool.

Cassandra started to bolt for the door, but Leliana stopped her. “Cass, don’t! If you march through town and drag Varric into the dungeon, all of Haven will know by supper. Calm down, and tell us what Varric told you.”

Cassandra started pacing back and forth. “He said that the Grey Wardens had imprisoned a sentient darkspawn who claimed to be one of the Tevinter magisters that breached the Golden City. Hawke’s father used blood magic, apparently under threat, to keep the prison wards intact.

“Varric said the Carta lured Hawke and his brother into this prison, along with Anders and Varric. He said they fought the magister and killed him.

“Obviously, he lied.”

The Herald tapped the omnitool. The projection where she had just interrupted the ritual reappeared in the air before them. She pointed at the creature that held the orb.

“You are sure he was talking about this person here?”

“Varric’s description was very elaborate, Herald. I am sure he enjoyed spinning his little tale for me.”

The Herald stared at the image for a moment. Turning her head slightly towards Cullen, but still looking at the image, she asked, “Commander, did the younger Hawke ever mention anything like this when he was a Templar?”

“No,” Cullen said. “Not that anyone would have believed him if he had. ‘I defeated one of the Magisters Sidereal,’ is a pretty big boast, even for Carver. But Varric is a secondary concern. We need to question Blackwall!”

The Herald finally looked away from her omnitool and up at him. “Why Blackwall?”

Cullen spluttered in disbelief that she would even ask such a thing. “Because he’s a Grey Warden!”
Josephine protested that Blackwall was a good man, and he could not possibly be involved with something like this.

Meanwhile, the Herald’s eyes widened slightly, as if she remembered something. “Ooh, that’s right. He’s a Warden. Leliana, did Blackwall ever come speak with you when he arrived in Haven?”

“He did,” Leliana said.

“Do you have any reason to believe he knows about the Wardens?” she asked, pointing to the Grey Wardens in the recording.

Leliana held the Herald’s gaze for a long moment, as Cullen grew impatient. Then she said, “No. I don’t.”

“Well, I do,” Cullen retorted. “He’s a Grey Warden, he needs to be questioned!”

The Herald turned off the omnitool. Then she stood up and walked to the door of the office. Like the other doors in the cellar, it was made of prison bars. She stood in front of it, her back to them, her hands on her hips, her feet shoulder-width apart.

After a moment of silence, she turned her head just enough to speak over her shoulder at them. “I suppose you want me present for these interrogations, to show proof of what happened at the Conclave?”

“Well, obviously,” Cullen muttered, while Cassandra and Leliana responded that yes, they wanted the Herald and her omnitool there.

She turned her head back to face the door again and stared out between the bars. Cullen itched to shove her out of the way, run up the stairs and find Blackwall.

Finally, she turned around to face them. She crossed her arms over her chest and propped one foot behind her against the door. It was a casual pose. It also effectively blocked any of them from leaving.

“I don’t know Blackwall at all, but you’ve trusted him enough to allow him to train the recruits, Commander.

“I do know Varric, at least a little. Cassandra, I do not doubt that he’s lied to you about many things, but he is not evil or cruel. He could have gone back home months ago. He chose to stay because he understands the threat.

“Is it your considered opinion that the best way to question these men is to drag them into your soundproof dungeon and accuse them of wrongdoing?”

“And what would you have us do, Herald, just ask them nicely?” Cullen sneered. “Maybe over some tea, perhaps?”

“I’d prefer cider and a good meal, but yes. That’s exactly what I’d do.”

“It isn’t your decision,” Cullen snapped.

“No, it isn’t,” the Herald calmly conceded, her gaze meeting his, “but I can decide how I respond, and whether I participate.
“I know what it’s like to be your prisoner. I will not stand by quietly while you abuse the people who are helping us. Especially not if you are doing it in my name.”

Cullen’s anger began to bleed into self-doubt.

Josephine delicately asked, “What would you suggest, Helen?”

The Herald looked around the messy little office they were in. “Is there truly no other place in Haven we can speak without being overheard?”

“Not without asking a mage to be present and continuously cast a silencing ward,” Leliana said. “It’s draining to the mage, and I don’t want more people involved in these interrogations than necessary.”

“Fair enough,” the Herald said. “All right. I want to talk to Blackwall first. Josie, you don’t have to be present for this if you don’t want to be, but can you make arrangements for lunch to be brought down, please?”

Josie, looking grateful for the reprieve, said, “Of course, Helen,” and left.

“Cassandra, do you mind getting Blackwall down here?” Cassandra scowled and left.

Finally, the Herald looked up at him. “Commander, if you want to take a few minutes for yourself, I need to speak with Leliana privately, please.”

Cullen glanced at Leliana, who gave him the slightest nod. He stalked out of the dungeon without saying a word. He exited the Chantry and squinted in the afternoon sunlight. The day was more than half gone.

He leaned against the outer wall of the Chantry and took deep breaths, trying to get the cellar damp out of his lungs and his emotions under control. He allowed his head to rest against the Chantry. He closed his eyes for a moment, and just let the sunlight warm his cheeks.
Don’t go back down there. The thought flitted into his mind and tempted him sorely. Leliana knows what she’s doing.

He had men to train, reports to read, trebuchets to calibrate. Any of it sounded better than going back into the same room as the Herald.

I will not stand by quietly while you abuse the people who are helping us.

To almost anyone else, the idea that Cullen could abuse somebody like Blackwall was ludicrous. But in the Herald’s mouth, the words carried the weight of truth, and any certainty he’d managed to find about the sort of man he was crumbled into insecurity.

Maker, he was tired.

“Cullen.”
Cassandra’s voice interrupted his thoughts. She walked towards the Chantry, a perplexed-looking Blackwall not two steps behind her.

Cullen pushed himself off of the wall and took one, last deep breath of clean air.

Questioning Blackwall had been his idea. How the Herald made him feel didn’t absolve him of his responsibility to see this through. He waited until the Seeker and the Warden had walked past him, and followed them into the Chantry.

Chapter End Notes

As always, my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen, were an enormous help with this chapter. Each chapter gets a bit more complicated. I could not do this without them.

We also have TWO lovely renders by the gossmackingly talented ProcrastiKate!! Both of them are amazing, but, NGL, that last one of Cullen is so perfect it almost made me cry when I saw it.

Not only that, ProcrastiKate also decided to do a render for Chapter 38. So, if you've already read Chapter 38, go back and take a look at her rendition of Helen and Leliana. It's beautiful.

Finally, thank you to all of you who are reading, reviewing, and/or leaving kudos. I keep every single email about a comment, and I appreciate all of you so much.
Chapter forty

Chapter Summary

The interrogations of Blackwall and Varric.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty

Cullen followed Cassandra and Blackwall back into the dungeon’s little office. Leliana poked through the baskets of food and drink on the table and desk.

The Herald sat on the desk, cramming the last of a sandwich into her mouth with one hand and holding a bottle of cider in the other. She swallowed her food, placed the cider on the desk and hopped off, brushing the crumbs off of her jacket.

She shook Blackwall’s hand. “Good to see you again. I apologize for dragging you down here but something has come up that we need to discuss.” She gestured towards the baskets of sandwiches and ale. “Help yourself.”

Blackwall shook his head. “M’fine.”

“You sure? You might want a drink for some of this.”

Blackwall shook his head again, looking nervous.

The Herald grabbed her own cider and hopped back onto the desk. Her feet dangled so far off the ground that she looked about ten-years-old.

*What in the Maker’s name is she doing?* This woman had no idea how to run an interrogation.

Cullen glanced at Cassandra to gauge her reaction, but she only gave him a bossy frown.

The Herald asked Blackwall, “Any questions before we start?”

“No, but I wish you woulda told me you were the Herald of Andraste when we met,” he harrumphed.

“I’m not the Herald of Andraste,” she said. “That label was placed upon me by others, and it’s one I’ve resisted from the beginning. I’d never claim to be perfect, but I do try not to lie about who I am. Not without cause, anyway.”

Blackwall crossed his arms over his chest, almost defensively.

“I imagine you’ve also been told that I’m from another galaxy,” the Herald continued.

Blackwall glanced at Leliana, who silently watched the exchange. “Sister Leliana said you claimed to be from another world, but I’ll tell you true. I don’t believe it.”
The Herald swallowed the rest of her cider. “Well,” she said, as she awkwardly leaned over to fish a bottle out of a basket, “I can’t blame you for that. It’s not an easy thing to believe.”

Having secured an ale, she straightened up and set the bottle on the desk beside her.

“Regardless, it’s the truth. In a perfect world, we would have been able to work together so you could get used to me. Unfortunately, we’re short on time.

“My people had access to some very advanced technology which I had with me when I landed on Thedas. It was stolen right after I was taken into custody, but it was eventually returned to me, just a few days before I met you, in fact.”

She slapped her right wrist, and the office was filled with the orange light of the omnitool.

Blackwall jumped. “Maker’s balls, girl! What kind of magic is that?”

“It isn’t magic at all; it’s an omnitool. What you’re looking at here is just light, honestly. It has no more magic than a candle,” she said, as she rotated her arm back and forth so he could see it.

Blackwall glanced at the advisors to see what their reactions were. None of them had reacted at all, Cullen realized, while Blackwall was thrown entirely off balance.

Cullen began to suspect that perhaps she had done this on purpose.

The Herald, meanwhile, kept talking as if she had not noticed Blackwall’s reaction.

“When I tracked you down, I told you that we were investigating whether the Grey Wardens were involved in the explosion at the Conclave. You assured me that the Wardens could not have been involved because they are apolitical.”

“That’s right,” Blackwall nodded.

“I don’t remember the Conclave explosion--I had a head injury--but the omnitool recorded the whole thing.”

She began the playback at a point not long before she entered the room of the sacrifice. They watched her wander the Temple, sick and confused.

“I had only landed on Thedas a few hours before,” she quietly explained, “and was suffering from radiation poisoning. I didn’t really know where I was.”

Blackwall didn’t seem to hear her. He was too focused on watching the recording, his eyes wide.

His reaction to seeing the Grey Wardens was immediate and visceral. All the color drained from his face, and his jaw dropped open in shock.

“I don’t - they wouldn’t - it can’t…”

The recording continued. Cullen found himself able to watch it without the panic and fury he’d felt at the first viewing.

Maker, Justinia had grit. Even in the middle of being sacrificed, she’d had the presence of mind to smack that orb away the moment the magister was distracted.

The Herald ran the recording until the explosion, then turned the omnitool off entirely. She looked at Blackwall.
Blackwall hadn’t just been surprised by the Wardens’ involvement. He’d been *shattered.*

The Herald handed him the ale she had reached for earlier. Blackwall took it with shaking hands. He pulled the cork and drank it all in three swallows. Then he placed one hand over his eyes and tried to regain his composure. “Maker,” he whispered.

“I know it’s a lot to take in all at once,” the Herald said gently, “but do you have *any* idea why the Wardens were involved?”

Blackwall lowered his hand from his face. He had tears in his eyes. “No.”

“Do you recognize that thing holding the orb?”

“No.”

Leliana took over. “Has any Warden been in touch with you?”

“No,” he mumbled.

The Herald glanced at Cullen. “Commander, do you have any questions for him?”

Cullen shook his head.

The Herald said to Blackwall, “I need you to keep this to yourself until further notice. Hundreds of people died that day, and we still don’t know why.”

Blackwall stood up a little straighter. “I’ll take this to my grave, if necessary. You have my word,” he said, his voice gruff.

The Herald replied, “I do not hold the actions of those Wardens against you. Your men admire you, and the Inquisition needs your expertise. You have a place here if you want it.”

Cullen thought she was being overly sentimental, as her words nearly moved Blackwall to tears again. The Warden inclined his head towards her and said, “My sword is yours, my lady.”

“Thank you. Seeker, do you mind escorting Blackwall back outside? And Leliana, would you be so kind as to ask Varric to join us, please?”

When everybody left, the Herald said, “Well, Commander? Are you satisfied that Blackwall doesn’t know about the Wardens’ involvement?”

“I am,” he replied. “Although you didn’t seem exactly surprised by his answers.”

The Herald unwrapped another sandwich for herself. “Blackwall might be good with a sword, but he’s a shit liar.” Then she waved off any further conversation in favor of eating.

When Varric arrived with Leliana and Cassandra, the Herald hopped off the desk to greet him. The Seeker scowled over everybody while Varric chatted up the Herald.

“So,” he said, “I hear you got your toy back.”

“Want to see it?”

“Does a nug shit in the woods?”

She tapped it on. Varric’s eyes lit up with delight. “Holy shit, wouldja look at that. Is everything
still there? Did you get your pictures back?”
“I did,” she said softly.

“I wanna see them all, but I’m guessing you didn’t ask me down here to show me your parent’s farm.”

“No. You remember how I told you that the omnitool might have recorded the explosion at the Temple of Sacred Ashes?”

“Crap, did it really? OK, let’s see it.”

She started the recording a little earlier than she had with Blackwall, and once again Cullen watched the Herald wander the Temple in confusion.

Varric’s face seemed to grow visibly older as he watched the people who had been in the Temple. “Those poor people,” he muttered.

But his sympathy turned into genuine fury when he saw the darkspawn magister. “That’s not possible!” he shouted. He watched the rest of the scene in shock.

Again, the Herald turned off the omnitool after the explosion.

Varric started pacing. “No, that can’t be him. It can’t be! We looted his corpse!”

Cassandra said icily, “You see, Herald? I told you. Varric is a liar. He always lies.”

But Cullen wasn’t so sure. Varric didn’t look defensive. He looked confused.

The Herald said, “My experience on Thedas so far has been that the dead don’t always stay that way.”

Varric picked up a bottle of ale and opened it. He looked Cassandra in the eye, and said, “I didn’t lie to you, Seeker, not about that. That doesn’t mean I told you everything.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Cassandra said rhetorically. “Start talking, dwarf.”

“Cassandra,” the Herald said, “you promised me you’d let me do this my way. My way is to ask Varric nicely if he would please tell us everything he knows.”

Varric took a swallow and started talking.

“Maker, this was a while back. I’d only known Hawke a couple of months. We were still trying to raise the money for Bartrand’s expedition into the Deep Roads.

“Hawke and Junior started getting jumped by the Carta, but the attacks were sloppy, ineffective. Not the Carta’s usual business model. We looked into it and learned the orders were coming from some compound in the Vinmark Wastelands.

“So, off we go. Me, Hawke, Junior and Blondie trek out to the middle of nowhere. We find the Carta hideout, and it doesn’t take long to figure out that these guys are crazy. They say they need the ‘blood of the Hawke,’ and that ‘Corypheus will rise again.’
“We get past their outer defenses and what do we see in the distance? A Grey Warden prison tower.

“Once we get inside the hideout, we learned that these poor bastards weren’t just crazy. They were under a compulsion from this Corypheus. They’d been eating darkspawn flesh on purpose so they could better hear their Master’s voice.”

“That’s revolting,” Cullen said. The Herald nodded in agreement.

Varric had finished his ale and took another one from the basket. “Yeah,” he frowned as he pulled the cork, “it was. I actually knew of couple of those dwarves. Wasn’t a lot of fun to put ’em down like that.

“Anyway, the head Carta was a dwarf named Rhatigan. He starts spouting some bullshit about Hawke’s blood, and how Corypheus will see the surface once more. He wouldn’t listen to reason, and they attacked us. We had to kill every last one of those sons of bitches.

“We tossed the place and Hawke found, of all things, a staff that had once belonged to his father, Malcolm. The second he picked it up, Hawke and that staff started to glow. It didn’t last long, but still - creepy shit. Hawke said he could feel it inside him.”

“That sounds like blood magic,” Cullen said.

“It was, but we didn’t learn that until later. Anyway, we get into the tower and, of course, we get magically sealed in. Now we’re trapped.

“We start looking for a way through the tower. Hawke keeps finding these magical triggers. Anytime he or Junior touches one, we hear his father’s voice.”

Varric took another drink and looked again at Cassandra. “One of the things I didn’t tell you, Seeker, was that while we’re working our way through, we found these research papers all over the place.

“The Grey Wardens have known almost since their founding that powerful, sentient darkspawn existed, who didn’t die when the Blights ended. They had drive and ambition, and they could command the darkspawn horde. The most powerful of these sentient darkspawn was Corypheus.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?” Cassandra demanded.

“Because you never asked!” Varric retorted, his voice beginning to rise. “You didn’t give a shit about the Wardens. You only cared about Hawke! You kidnapped me, you placed me under arrest even though I hadn’t committed any crime, and you dragged me - ”

“Enough!” the Herald said.

“Herald! You cannot possibly believe this - ” Cassandra began.

“I said, enough!” the Herald’s voice had turned icy. “We are not out in the field. This isn’t an argument you can carry until we come across the next rift. Whatever this is between the two of you, work it out some other time. Right now, we need answers.”

Cassandra ground her teeth as she swallowed back whatever she really wanted to say. Varric, exasperated, threw up the hand that wasn’t holding a drink and started pacing again.

But they both obeyed her.
After a moment, the Herald said, “Sentient darkspawn.”

Varric drained his ale. “Sentient darkspawn,” he repeated. “Blondie said he’d actually met one when he was still with the Wardens, back in Amaranthine. He described it as, ‘persuasive.’

“Then this ghoul in Grey Warden armor staggers over to us.
"He gets all excited when he sees Hawke with his dad’s old staff. ‘The Key,’ he calls it. ‘The Key to his death!’ He wants Hawke to ‘break the seals,’ so Corypheus can be killed. Then he just leaves.

“We find a seal, the Key opens it, we kill a giant demon. Ghoulie Warden shuffles back. Now he’s *really* excited. He says his name was Larius, and that he used to be Commander of the Grey. He’d been down there for 30 years. Said he was still alive because the corruption had been feeding him or something.

“Then he takes off again to Maker-knows where. He did that a lot, actually. Anyway, we keep fighting our way through demons and darkspawn and bullshit…”

Cullen listened, half-impressed, half-horrified, as Varric described their journey through the prison tower.

They met another Grey Warden mage, Janeka.
She told them that the prison tower had been built by the Wardens centuries before, for the sole purpose of containing Corypheus. This was back when the Free Marches were still part of the Imperium, and blood magic hadn’t yet been banned.

When the seals began to fade, the Wardens needed a non-Warden mage to use blood magic to restore them. Malcolm Hawke had been that mage. And now, only his blood, through either of his children, could break the seals.

Cullen swallowed his irritation several times when the Herald interrupted Varric’s tale to ask questions. “What is the taint?” “What is the Calling?” “Are darkspawn normally not sentient?” “I thought the Old Gods were just a myth?” On and on. It was damned annoying.

Eventually, she managed to shut up long enough to let Varric finish his tale.

The dwarf rubbed his forehead. “Maker, it was a mess. We work our way down into the Deep Roads to the base of the tower. Blondie starts hearing Corypheus’ voice. His plus-one made an appearance, so we had to fight that.

“Finally, we get to the tower. Larius and Janeka both show up. Larius said Corypheus was using a false Calling to influence Janeka and the Carta, and that she was a fool for not realizing it.

“Janeka said she wasn’t an idiot, that she was going to bind Corypheus to her will, and then use
him to cure the Blight.

“Then she drops the big bombshell. Larius had forced Malcolm Hawke into using blood magic by telling him if he didn’t cooperate, he’d never see his wife and unborn child ever again.

“Larius didn’t even deny it. Said it had been his duty.

“And that was that. Larius had threatened Leandra and little baby Hawke, so Hawke and Junior sided with Janeka. Larius tried to stop us from getting to the tomb, and Janeka killed him.”

Varric swallowed the rest of the ale in his bottle and placed it on the desk. He seemed to be working himself up to say something.

“And this is the other part I didn’t tell you, Seeker. I told you last time that Hawke had placed the Key over the Seal to break it. What I didn’t tell you was that he also use a few drops of his own blood.”

Cullen felt like the floor had tilted. Hawke? A blood mage?

“What?” Cassandra sounded both outraged and hurt. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Because I knew you’d take it the wrong way! And in the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t that important!”

“Of course it’s important! It’s blood magic,” Cullen protested. “I’d have never thought that Hawke, of all people, would have ever succumbed to the temptation!”

“You sound like Junior. He didn’t listen well, either. No wonder he became a Templar!” Varric said, raising his voice again. “We were trapped, remember? The only way out was through Corypheus. We couldn’t break the seal without the blood of Malcolm Hawke’s kid, and you know damn well Hawke would have never let Junior do it!

“So Hawke did what he’s always done. He risked himself to protect everybody else. If he hadn’t done it, our bones would still be down there in the Deep Roads. And nobody would have been there to save Kirkwall from burning to the ground when the Qunari invaded.

“Now, you wanna keep bitching about the man who’s saved your ass more than once? Or are you gonna let me finish my story?”

Cullen pressed his lips together and gestured for Varric to continue.

“As I was saying,” Varric pointedly grumbled, “Hawke broke the seal, and Corypheus just sort of,” he moved his hand slowly upwards, “floated out. Janeka tried to bind him to her will, but he brushed her off like she was nothing.

“Corypheus was confused. The way he talked was, I dunno, old-fashioned. ‘Am I in dwarven lands? Why seem their roads so empty?’ He saw us and started making demands, told us to ‘bring him hence’ to the temple of Dumat.

“Then he got real high handed, said we all owed him fealty because he was a Tevinter Magister. He even ordered us to kneel.

“Hawke, of course, made fun of him. ‘You’re a darkspawn. Daarrk spaaawwwn.’”
Credit where credit was due, Varric did a spot-on impression of Garrett.

“Corypheus hollered for Dumat, and got pissy when his Old God didn’t answer him. He complained that they’d been seeking the golden light, but when they found it, it was black and corrupt.

“The longer he rants, the more we realize that he’s talking about the Golden City, that he’s one of those magisters. Janeka thought that even though Corypheus had been asleep, he must have been unconsciously speaking to her through the corruption.

“And, of course, Corypheus came after us. Sweet ass of Andraste, it was one of the hardest fights I’d ever been in. We nearly lost Junior.

“But we did kill Corypheus,” he said, looking at Cassandra. “Killed him dead. Dead on the ground. I turned over his body myself with my own foot.

“When it was all over, Janeka seemed, I don’t know. Less confused. Sharper, maybe. Now that she wasn’t hearing the false calling, she seemed to feel better or something. She apologized for being such a fool. Then she left.

“We looted the place, including Corypheus’ body. We returned to the surface with enough money to fund Bartrand’s expedition. A month later, we went into the Deep Roads. Carver stayed behind and joined the Templars.”

The Herald turned her omnitool back on, and found her way to the scene where she first interrupted the sacrifice. She paused the recording, then tapped on Corypheus’ face, making it much larger and easier to see, like a portrait.

“You are sure this is the same man?” she asked Varric.

Varric nodded. “Yup. I mean, now he looks like he’s been getting into the red lyrium, but yeah. Same guy.”

“Was there red lyrium in the tower?”

“Not that I saw.”

The Herald nodded, and turned off the omnitool. “Does anybody else have any questions of Varric?” She was looking at Cassandra.

Cassandra scowled at Varric. “What else have you not told us?”

“Plenty,” he said, crossing his arms across his chest, “but I’ve told you everything about this.”

“Where’s Hawke?” she demanded.

“Couldn’t say.”

Cassandra and Varric glared at each other, until the Herald gave a quiet little sigh. “Varric, thank you. I’m sorry for dragging you down here like this.”

Varric broke the staring contest with Cassandra and looked at the Herald. “Are they paying you yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”
He sent one last glare to Cassandra. “Well, when you’re done talking to these cheapskates, you come find me in the tavern. Dinner’s on me.”

“Are you sure? Feeding a biotic is expensive.”

“I’m sure. You’re too thin.”

“Thank you, Varric. I’ll see you soon.”

Once Varric was gone, Leliana said, “I believe him, at least about Corypheus.”

“So do I,” the Herald chimed in. Cullen nodded in agreement.

Cassandra was scowling so hard, her eyebrows could have crushed rocks, but she grudgingly admitted, “If nothing else, I believe that he believes he killed this Corypheus.”

“All right then,” the Herald said. “It’s getting late, and we all have other duties. Let’s meet tomorrow morning and talk about where we go from here.”

Cassandra and the Herald both left. Leliana, however, stopped Cullen before he could go.

“Here,” she handed him a sandwich and a bottle of ale. “You are not the only one who looks too thin. How are you feeling today?”

Cullen looked at the food and drink in his trembling hands. The thought of consuming them made him nauseous. “Honestly?” he croaked. “Like finding a bucket of lyrium, and bathing in it.”

“You should tell her. She noticed your hands shaking today. She asked me about it earlier, when you and Cassandra had gone to get Blackwall.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That it was not my story to tell.”

“Thank you,” Cullen said. He reluctantly took a bite of sandwich and drank some ale.

“You’re welcome,” Leliana said, concern in her tone. “But you should still tell her. I know you don’t like her, but she’ll keep it to herself. If nothing else, she’s far better at keeping secrets than I realized.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

But he didn’t mean it. The Herald was strange and unpredictable. Everything about her threw him off-balance, made him uncertain. The more uncertain he was, the stronger his cravings became.

Cullen didn’t care how well she could keep a secret. He wasn’t going to tell her a damn thing.

Chapter End Notes

Heaps of thanks for my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. They gave me a lot of feedback, especially about Varric. And ProcrastiKate did another eye-popping render, this time of Helen, Varric and Cassandra in the dungeon’s office. (check out the expression on Cassandra’s face. So perfect!)
For those of you who never played DA2, the story Varric is recounting here is from the Legacy DLC.

Finally, thank you to everybody for reading, commenting, and leaving kudos! I appreciate all of you so much.
Chapter forty-one

Chapter Summary

Helen is not Haven's ray of sunshine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter forty-one

Solas spent his first day back in Haven ordering new armor from Harritt, and checking in with his agents.

He learned that Helen and the advisors spent most of the day in the Chantry, and that Blackwall and Varric had been individually called to speak with them.

Solas knew they were likely watching the recording of the Conclave. Blackwall had probably been called to seek answers to the presence of the Grey Wardens. He could only speculate why Varric had been summoned.

He wondered what the advisors would think of what they saw, of Helen’s omnitool and the Conclave recording.

Telina stopped by his cabin in the early evening. She told him that the Herald had just overheard Seggrit call Telina a "knife ear."

“She was none too happy about it,” Telina said, in an almost awed tone. “She called him a you...a you-serv-us…”

“Usurious?” he suggested

“Yes. That. A ‘you-sir-ee-ous bastard,’ is what she called him. Then she said that if she ever heard him use the term ‘knife-ear’ ever again, she’d kick him out of Haven herself.

“Oh, and the Herald also asked me to tell you that she's eating at Master Tethras’ table tonight at Flissa’s, and that you're welcome to join them.”

Solas handed the girl a copper. “Kindly tell the Herald that I appreciate her invitation but that I am occupied this evening."

Telina curtsied and left.

And occupied he was, for the Veil in and around Haven had weakened in his absence. Demons populated the Fade here in alarming numbers. That Rage demon he had encountered months earlier had grown eager and fat.

Solas, ostensibly asleep, frantically worked to press as much of his will as he could spare into shoring up the Veil.
He did what he could, but he knew the stability of the Breach would not hold indefinitely.

On the second day, he was awakened entirely too early in the morning by loud banging on the door.

“Solas!” Cassandra shouted. “You are needed in the War Room. I will wait for you here.”

“A moment, please,” he called back. He quickly got dressed and left his cabin. Cassandra would not tell him why his presence was necessary, only that he needed to “clarify” something the Herald had just told them.

“Ir abelas,” Helen murmured as soon as he walked in with Cassandra. “I told her this could wait.”

He glanced at her. She had dark circles under her eyes, and had turned her body so that her left hand was mostly hidden from view.

The Seeker got straight to the point. “The Herald seems to be under the impression that closing the Breach will kill her, and that you told her this.”

Helen’s brow wrinkled in consternation. “That is not what I said, Cassandra! I said I might die. Solas only confirmed for me that it was a possibility.”


Solas clasped his hands behind his back. “The Herald’s physiology is singularly ill-equipped for tolerating magic. She nearly died closing the rift at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Closing the Breach will take far more out of her.”

“Well, if she can’t tolerate magic,” the Commander made it sound like a character defect, “we should recruit the Templars.”

Solas straightened his shoulders, and looked down his nose at the Ferelden man. "Using the Templars would cause less strain on the Herald, that is true. However, given the amount of Fade magic that must necessarily pour through the Mark to close the Breach, I doubt it will matter much in the end. Either way will be hazardous for her.”

The Commander opened his mouth to say something else, but Helen cut him off.

“Which goes to my original point in this discussion--I should go to my escape pod before we close the Breach.”

“You ship has been located?” Solas asked.

“Yes, and it’s leaking eezo, or it was six months ago, anyway. Nobody else can repair it.”

"I see," Solas said, neutrally.

“Does anybody else have questions for Solas?” Helen asked.

Nobody did.

She turned back to Solas. “Ma serannas, Solas. I apologize for the Seeker waking you so early.”

Solas heard the dismissal but ignored it. Instead, he reached for Helen’s left hand. She tried to pull it away, but he kept his grip firm.
The flesh around the Mark was visibly inflamed, and hot to the touch.

“Fel'sounath’asha! We have discussed this before!” he scolded, as he released a healing spell into her hand.

“What’s he talking about?” Leliana asked.

The question was not directed at Solas, but he answered it anyway as he focused on the palm of Helen’s hand. “The Mark is a source of chronic pain for the Herald, but it is considerably worse this close to the Breach. If I had to guess, she has had little to no sleep since she arrived in Haven.”

“You do realize I am right here, yes? That I am perfectly capable of answering these questions on my own?” Helen sounded annoyed, but her shoulders sagged in relief.

Solas frowned at her. “Have you considered, Herald, what happens to Thedas if you become so exhausted that you do not survive long enough to seal the Breach fully? If you die halfway through the process?”

He did not like using guilt to motivate people, but Helen's sense of self-preservation was beginning to wane.

“I try not to think about closing the Breach at all, only what I must do to get us there,” she admitted. “That was shortsighted of me.”

Solas let go of her hand. “I trust you will find me should the need arise.”

“And if she doesn’t, I will,” Cassandra said, scowling at Helen. “Thank you, Solas.”

He left everything he wanted to say inside his mouth, and showed himself out.

He briefly chatted with Varric, subtly encouraging the dwarf to speak of what had happened yesterday in the Chantry. Varric ignored any prompt about that, but he did express his concerns about Helen.

“They’re pushing her too hard,” Varric fretted. “She’s thin, she’s tired, and she’s way too quiet.”

“She pushes herself,” Solas observed. “It seems to be her nature.”

Varric scratched his cheek. “Maybe. Still, remember how she used to pester us with all those questions? Last night, didn’t say more than five words. And she almost fell asleep at the table.”

After leaving Varric, Solas spent the rest of the morning with Mor’ Lanun.

The horse shook his mane and nickered happily he saw Solas.

“Come here, you spoiled thing,” Solas said in Elvish as he opened up the stable door. Mor’Lanun eagerly nosed Solas’ pockets, hoping for a treat. “Such poor manners,” Solas said, as he fed the horse an apple. “Perhaps I will change your name to Gluttony.”

Solas took the gelding out into the valley and absolutely did not think about Helen, or what she might be doing.

**

That afternoon, Owin, the young elf mage who was on Helen’s Medical Corps, tracked him down.
“On dhea, lethallin. How can I help you?”

Owin smiled brightly at the moniker, and gave a slight bow. “The Herald is going to examine the pregnant woman you treated for poison several weeks ago. She asks if you would like to take part.”

“I would.” Solas was not especially concerned with the pregnant woman herself, but was quite interested in what Helen’s omnitool might reveal.

As they made their way to the healer’s tents, Owin whispered, “Have you seen it? The Herald’s bracelet?”

“The omnitool? Yes, I have.”

“Oh, I want one so much! The Herald showed up to see how we were doing, and Rose tattled on Ser Kason for neglecting his hand washing. And the Herald took his hands and scanned them.

“Then she showed us these tiny little creatures that were living on his hands! Bacteria, she called them. She said they can cause infection. They were moving! And they divided and made more of themselves. It was revolting!”

Owin beamed, radiant with happiness, as he recounted the conversation.

Solas could not help but be charmed by the young man’s enthusiasm, and decided to keep an eye on his progress. Bright spirits like Owin’s were critical for keeping up morale in the rank and file.

But that sort of recruiting would have to wait.

They entered one of the Medic’s tent. Helen was speaking with Rose and a red-faced Ser Kason.

“It’s called quorum sensing,” Helen was saying, “and it’s why you must be diligent about sanitation. I’ll print up some articles for you later. Oh, hello again, Solas.”

“Herald,” he replied, allowing a little bit of amusement to inflect his tone.

Ser Bennet arrived, with a very pregnant, very bald Cecelia.

The woman took one look at Helen and turned purple with rage. “You murderous bitch!” she spat.

Helen narrowed her eyes. “Murderous? No. Murder implies some forethought or planning. I killed your boyfriend in my sleep. That says a lot about him, doesn’t it?

“But you’ve got the ‘bitch’ part right. I’ll grant you that.”

Cecelia gasped in anger, and raised her hand to strike Helen. Solas half-expected the mages or Templars to intervene, but all four of them stood and watched, not moving at all.

As Cecelia took a step towards Helen, Helen flared her biotics around herself, like blue fire.

Cecelia’s arm stopped in mid-air. She went pale, her eyes wide open. Her hand shook when she lowered it.

“They said you wasn’t a mage.”

Helen extinguished her biotics. “I’m not. I’m a biotic.

“Before I was born, I was exposed to element zero. When that happens, babies can get very sick.
They can die. Sometimes, they become a biotic, like I did. Sometimes, nothing happens at all.

“When you wore my stolen clothing, you exposed your baby to element zero.

"I can check the baby's health if you like, but this is a one time offer. I won’t make it again. So choose."

Helen's voice was cold. Clipped. She was offering to help the foolish woman's innocent, unborn child while simultaneously looking and sounding utterly ruthless.

“How do I know you ain’t just tryin’ to hurt me? Or my baby?”

“You don’t.”

“Do I hafta get naked in front of all these people?”

“No.”

Cecelia somehow managed to make a shrug look hostile, as she said, “All right. You can look.”

Rose helped Cecelia to lay down on a cot, where several pillows had been stacked at one end.

Helen sat on the stool and pulled up her right sleeve. “I’m about to turn this on. You’ll see an orange light.”

She held her right hand over the pregnant woman’s navel, and a cone of light covered Cecelia’s abdomen. Helen moved the cone slowly back and forth for a moment. The slightly unfocused look in her eyes told Solas that she was listening to whatever the omnitool was saying to her.

After a moment, she lowered her hand, and touched the omnitool.

The display showed a perfect, three-dimensional image of Cecelia’s baby in the womb, tucked in a fetal position.

All four of the medics gasped. Cecelia gave a quiet sob. “Is that my baby?” she asked.

“Yes,” Helen said. “Do you want to know if its a boy or a girl?”

“Maker, yes.”

“It’s a boy.”

Cecelia laughed, tears streaming down her face.

Helen tapped on the interface. Glowing dots of light of varying size appeared all along the baby’s spine and limbs and in his brain.

“What’s that?” Cecelia asked, her smile disappearing.

“That,” Helen answered, as she continued tapping, “is element zero. Had you not been pregnant, it eventually would have killed you. Since you were pregnant, the eezo had a new and growing nervous system to attach itself.”

She kept tapping, and the dots began to pulsate. "He's developing nodules in all of the places you'd expect for a biotic. And there's no evidence that he's developed any malignancies or mutations yet. Let me check his neurology..."
Then she tapped some more, and the dots disappeared. They were replaced by the branching of the baby’s nervous system.

“His nervous system is very dense. He’s made a lot of extra connections that are not typical in most infants.”

Cecelia got teary-eyed again. “Is he sick?”

Helen turned off the image and looked at Cecelia. “No. He isn’t sick. So far, he appears perfectly healthy.

“But I won’t lie. His little body has a lot of eezo in it. With that much exposure, developing biotics is probably the best result you can hope for.”

Helen produced her little biotic ball over her right hand. “Biotics uses the body’s own energy. If his biotics come in, he’ll need a lot more food than most children.

“He also has neurological development similar to the mages I’ve scanned.”

“A biotic mage?” Solas asked. Now that was an interesting development.

Cecelia was horrified. “He’s a mage?”

Helen shrugged. “Maybe? We didn’t have magic in my world, so I don’t really know.”

Cecelia began to sob again. “My baby’s going to be a freak!”

Helen raised one eyebrow and leaned back just a little.

“Look, lady, I’m trying to help you--” but Cecelia cut her off.

“It’s your fault,” she hissed, placing her arms protectively around her stomach. ‘You brought the poison here.”

"Not by choice. And I sure as hell didn't walk into Haven and say, ‘Here, wear this, it'll be good for the baby.'"

“I din’t know they was poisoned!”

“But you did know they were mine.”

“Sister Leliana said I could keep them!”

Helen just shrugged. “I could have prevented this had anybody bothered to tell me. Nobody did, and here we are.

“Your baby is innocent. I’m the only biotic on Thedas. I can tell you what to expect and how to help him, but only if you’re willing to listen.”

Cecelia hoisted herself up off of the cot. She placed her hand on her lower back to support her swollen stomach, and glared at Helen for all she was worth.

"I hate you. I hate you, and I hope you fuckin' die. I'd kill you myself if I could."

Helen let out a dismissive little breath. “Oh, stand in line. Ser Bennet? Would you be so kind as to escort our guest back to whatever it was she was doing before?”
“Gladly,” Bennet said. He held open the tent flap. Cecelia held her bald head high and marched out.

Helen sighed. "Hope that kid is smarter than his parents. Anyway, Rose. Birthing a biotic baby can get tricky. Here are things to look for when the time comes."

Childbirth was not something Solas had much interest in, so he left them to their discussions.

**

Helen came to his cabin that evening with a bottle of Nevarran white and two cups. She sat down at his little table without being invited, and poured for both of them.

"If you're going to be my healer on demand," she said, holding out her left hand, "the least I can do is buy you a drink now and then."

He shook his head at Helen’s odd turn of phrase, but sat down opposite her. Her hand felt like it was running its own fever. “I am glad to see you listened to me,” he said as he sank a healing spell into her.

She closed her eyes and sighed in relief. After a moment, she opened her eyes and said, “Honestly, I almost didn’t bother. Once the effect wears off, the rebound pain that follows is awful, especially here.

“But I can’t have all of you angry with me all at once. And I really do need the sleep.”

“Who else is angry with you?” he asked, filing away her remark about pain.

"My advisors. All of them. Even Josie and that takes some doing."

“Why are they angry with you?”

Helen took a sip of wine, then sighed and answered, “Leliana was very angry that I did not return to Haven as soon as I’d learned what had really happened at the Conclave explosion. She got rather ugly about it, actually.

“It’s a shame. I tend to agree with Leliana more than any other advisor. Do you know that when she learned the alienage was unprotected, she sent two dozen Inquisition soldiers and scouts, all of them elves, to be quartered at the boarding house there?

"Officially, it's only temporary until the Inquisition can ‘complete necessary improvements at the nearest Inquisition camp.’ It's mostly pretext, but we need some reason for being there, so we don't look like an occupying force ourselves. And it's a fantastic recruiting tool."

It was, indeed, and it reminded Solas not to underestimate the Spymaster.

"By the way," Helen continued, “we’ve watched the Conclave recording a few times now. No one mentioned that the orb might be elven, so I didn’t say anything, either.”

“Do they know that you showed me the recording?”

“No, nobody asked. Where was I?

“Oh, right. Cassandra is upset with me because I took Varric’s side this morning during a meeting.”
“It is not like you to take sides,” he remarked. “Usually, you let us argue ourselves out. Or you tell us to--how did you so eloquently put it?--ah, yes. ‘Stop bitching.’”

Helen grinned. “And so you did! Both of you, for almost a whole day!

“Anyway, Cassandra was bad-mouthing Varric this morning about some decisions he made in Kirkwall.

“He wasn’t there to defend himself, so I argued his side. I told her that, speaking from personal experience, her ‘stab first, question second’ method was counterproductive. And that she was damn lucky Varric spoke to her at all, given his treatment at her hands.”

She took another swallow of wine, and said, “I also pointed out that the Chantry in Haven has a soundproof jail for its foundation, and that I had drawn my own conclusions about what that symbolized.”

Solas gave a bark of laughter, and refilled Helen’s cup. He set the bottle back on the table, leaned back in his chair and gazed at her.

You are wonderful. He did not say it, but he did not hide his emotions, either.

“You approve,” she said.

“I do. The Chantry has fostered abuses for centuries. Those in power need to hear such truths.”

“I think Cassandra agrees with that, actually. All of the advisors do, from what I can tell. But Cassandra didn’t want to hear it right after I’d defended Varric. That man really gets under her skin.

“Let’s see. Josie isn’t really angry at me, as much as she’s offended by my taste. She had Harritt make me the most beautiful set of Silverite armor.

“Unfortunately, it weighs almost as much as I do. I’d need double portions of food just to walk across Haven in it. So, I thanked her profusely and declined to use it.”

“I can understand her disappointment,” Solas acknowledged, “but surely she appreciates that your well-being is paramount?”

“She does. What she did not appreciate was that I turned around and asked Amund Watcher of the Sky to help Harritt craft some of that fur armor like I wore when I first woke up in Haven.”

Solas let that sink in for a moment. “You are replacing the gift of Silverite plate armor with barbarian furs.”

"Those ‘barbarian furs' are the only thing I've worn in Haven that kept me warm."

Solas took a sip of wine, thinking back to the day Helen had first emerged from her little cabin. “I watched you walk up the steps of Haven in that armor,” he said. “I thought at the time that it made you look like a child.”

Helen shrugged. “It probably will again. I don’t care. It was lightweight and warm. As soon as it’s ready, I’m wearing it. I’m tired of being cold all the time. If I die closing the Breach, I’m going to be comfortable doing it.”

She gave a heavy sigh and frowned. “Speaking of closing the Breach, that brings me to why
Commander Rutherford is angry with me. Remember how I told the advisors today that I’m going to repair my escape pod before I close the Breach?”

Solas nodded, and Helen continued.

“He feels that the eezo is much less of a threat than the Breach. And that the three or four days it would take to deal with the pod is ample time for an abomination to sweep through Haven and kill everybody.”

Solas, having spent much of his time in the Fade doing what he could to prevent precisely that, had to admit, “That is a reasonable fear for him to have.”

“Is it?” Helen asked.

Solas nodded. Her shoulders slumped a little.

“Oh. I was sort of hoping you would tell me he was overreacting because honestly, his objections are the only ones giving me pause. I don’t want to put more people at risk.

“But I just --”

She looked down at the table, her right hand clenching around her cup. He saw her blink back tears.

As Helen struggled to regain her composure, Solas warred with himself. Helen trusted him, and felt isolated from her other advisors. He was her friend. Comforting her would be appropriate.

But his instinct to pull her onto his lap, to wipe away her tears and shelter her from the world until she felt ready to face it again, could not be interpreted as pure friendship.

Paralyzed by uncertainty, he did nothing.

After a while, Helen took a couple of breaths and drained her cup of wine. Holding the cup close to her chest, she quietly admitted, “I know it is selfish, to want to take the time to go to the escape pod. But I have so many questions, and it is the only thing within my reach that might have answers.”

“What sort of answers could your ship give you?” he asked.

“Why were we all still in cryo? I saw the vid, Solas. Almost everybody was still asleep, still on the Hyperion. Why weren’t more people already awake? Why weren’t we on Habitat Seven?

“And how the hell was Clinton able to get into the Initiative? That man couldn’t be trusted to leave a box of air unlocked. Who gave him a security clearance that let him alter my bio and have us listed as married?”

She set her cup down on the table with a loud clatter, as her voice rose with each question. “How come nobody noticed that an escape pod and a cryo unit had gone missing? Why didn’t anybody come looking for me?”

Tears pooled in her eyes as her voice broke. “How could they throw me away like that?”

Helen inhaled sharply, clasping both hands over her mouth as if she had just admitted something to herself for the first time. She closed her eyes. A few tears slipped down her cheeks.

Her anguish broke through his indecision. Solas stood up and reached for her, pulling her out of her
chair and into his embrace. Helen kept her hands over her face and leaned into him. She made no noise, save for great, shuddering gasps.
This was not like the night he had returned her omnitool to her, where she had mourned all that was lost to her. That weeping had been a catharsis.

This was the quiet agony of betrayal. Solas knew from bitter experience that no words existed to take away that sting, or the self-doubt that followed.
So he said nothing, and tightened his embrace as her tears leaked through her fingers. He swayed a little back and forth. Her hair was clean and soft. She smelled like soap.

It took her a long time before she had calmed enough to remove her hands from her face. She wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“Solas, I am so sorry,” she said, as she began to step away.

"You do not need to apologize," he said, reluctantly letting her go.

"Thank you; it's just--"

She looked away, staring into the hearth. Then she chewed her lip, something he had not seen her do in months.

It made her look young and small and vulnerable. Solas wanted to pull her back into his arms, learn what bothered her so, and fix it.

You wanted her to pull away, remember?

So he kept his arms by his sides, and instead offered a solution to a problem he understood.

“Whether you recruit the mages or the Templars, a group that large will need several days to reach Haven. A small ground team, properly chosen, should be able to return swiftly enough to give you time for your escape pod before the bulk of the forces arrives.”

She turned her gaze to him. “Will you go with me?”

"Yes. I will go with you." He did not know if she meant to recruit or to the escape pod, and found he did not care to ask. The answer was the same, either way.

“Serannasan Ma, Solas. And I should go. It’s getting late, and I need some sleep.”

“Before you go,” said, then he picked up her left hand again rather than complete his sentence. As he sent another healing spell into it, she looked up at him.

It was not the watery gaze of the woman who had just realized that her own people had discarded her to a terrible fate. It was the direct, penetrating stare that made so many Thedosians uncomfortable around her.
It had been disconcerting then, and was no less so now. He met her eyes, but did not break the silence.

When he was finished healing her hand, he said, “On nydhea, Helen. Sleep well.”

“On nydhea.” She slipped out of his cabin, leaving the door open behind her.

Not much later, he was back at work in the Fade, setting his wards and shoring up the Veil, when the inevitable happened.

The Rage Demon came speeding by him, pumping its club hands over its head in celebration. “Yes! She said YES!”
Then it vanished through the Veil.

Solas instantly woke and leaped out of bed. Before his feet hit the floor, he heard screams and shouting from the direction of Helen's cabin.

Taking only the time to pull on clothing and grab his staff, Solas yanked open his door, and sprinted through Haven as fast as he could.

Over everything, over all of the noise, Helen’s piercing voice desperately shouted his name.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you mightily to dreadlordcherrycake for her excellent beta work on this. She gave me some really crucial feedback in the early drafts.

And ProcrastiKate has outdone herself with two fabulous renders. She tumblrs at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com/

Thank you to all who have left comments and kudos. I apologize for the delay in responding. The last few weeks have been one long string of real-life events (nothing bad, in fact, much of it quite good. Just very busy)
Chapter forty-two

Chapter Summary

Rage makes a mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-two

*Get your shit together, Trevelyan. Don’t cry, don’t bitch, don’t blame. And for fuck’s sake, stop bawling all over Solas.*

Helen berated herself all the way back to the cabin. She hurried by the noise and warmth of Flissa’s pub, avoiding eye contact with everyone she passed.

Helen wasn’t stupid. She knew that six months on Thedas had taken a heavy toll. A medical scan that morning had shown that she’d lost another 6% of her body mass. Her psych profile was probably a disaster of acronyms and disorders by now. Had she shown up for work back home in her current state, she’d have been placed on mandatory medical leave.

*How could they throw me away like that?*

Saying it outloud had deeply shocked her, like accidentally ripping off her own skin. She had sat there at Solas’ table, paralyzed with shame and wishing she were anywhere else.

She’d been grateful at first when Solas pulled her into his arms. She’d needed to hide her face to bury her misery. But as she calmed down, she’d realized his face was buried in her hair.

A lover’s embrace. She’d wanted to return it as much as she’d wanted to push him away.

She did neither, too unsure of her own feelings to do anything but step away.

Solas had been gentle and kind, offering good advice and healing her hand one last time before she retired for the night. But judging by the look on his face, he felt as conflicted as she did.

Helen locked the door of her cabin behind her. She changed into her nightgown, washed her face and brushed her teeth. But instead of going to sleep, she tapped her right wrist and found the security vid of Solas examining the omnitool.

She watched it all the way through. What was it that Leliana had said? *Solas isn’t exactly hard on the eyes.*

Well, she wasn’t wrong.

Helen took a screenshot of Solas’ face, then opened her miscellaneous files, which she had labeled “IDGAF” back in basic training and had never bothered to change.

She found the file containing Solas’ DNA scan. She attached the screenshot as his contact photo
and opened up the results of the scan.

Anomalies found with this subject:

Elevated levels of telomerase.

Elevated levels of repair proteins (click here for details, infra.)

Helen had expected that Solas carried the same genetic markers as the other elves she’d scanned, but that was evidently not the case.

Chromosomes had little bits of DNA at their ends called telomeres. Telomeres prevented genetic information from getting scrambled, like the plastic tip of a shoelace kept the lace from fraying. Every time a cell divided, the telomeres became a little bit shorter.

Somatic cells, which make up most of the body, eventually reach a point where the telomeres become too short. The cells stop dividing and eventually die.

It was evolution’s way of protecting the genetic code. The DNA stayed intact, but the cost was cell death and aging.

A few types of cells escaped this fate - germ cells, cancer cells, gametes, and stem cells. Those cells expressed an enzyme called telomerase which built the telomeres back up. It allowed the cells to keep dividing without dying off.

Telomerase was a wonderful thing for reproduction. It allowed a fertilized egg to grow into a fully-formed infant.

But in adults, abnormally high levels of telomerase usually indicated the presence of cancer, because telomerase allowed most cancers to grow and spread.

Helen only knew about telomerase because eezo exposure significantly increased the risk of cancer. Checking telomerase levels had been a part of every medical scan she’d ever had, including the one she’d run on herself that very morning.

But she knew next to nothing about repair proteins. They could repair DNA damage. That was all she knew.

Helen clicked on the hyperlink, expecting it would list a few proteins. Instead, it listed categories.


On and on it went. Clicking on a category lead to a laundry list of enzymes and proteins, all hyperlinked to articles in the omnitool’s libraries. Helen quickly found herself down a rabbit hole of medical jargon she didn’t understand. She exited out and stared at the profile page she’d created for Solas.

“Were any cancer cells identified?” she asked the VI.

“Negative.”

“Any pre-cancerous cells?”
“Negative.”

“How did he not have cancer? Was it because of all the repair proteins? And how much energy did
his body need to keep up that sort of cell growth, and where was he getting it? The man hardly ate.
Was this why he slept so much?

Maybe it was a mage thing.

Vivienne had some signs of mild degenerative disc disease, although nothing unusual for a woman
her age. In every other sense, Vivienne was perfectly normal. “Normal” in that she had all of the
neurological markers of a mage, and her cells weren’t awash in telomerase.

Helen was entering search terms into the Alliance medical archives when she heard a commotion
outside her cabin.

Men’s drunken voices leered and jeered. “Where d’ya think yer goin’ now?” “Let’s have a look
atcha, Hester.” “Ooooooo, ye got a decent set a tits under these robes, doncha.”

A woman’s voice said, “No, let me through, I need to talk to the Herald. Stop it! Leave me alone!
Stop it!”

Helen shut down the omnitool, flew to her cabin door and yanked it open.

Four drunk guardsmen were in the middle of the square, pushing a small woman between them like
a rag doll. It was Hester, one of the mages who had failed to get onto Helen’s medical corps.

Hester had her arms crossed defensively across her chest, trying to cover herself from where her
robes had been ripped open.

“Stand down!” Helen shouted. “STAND DOWN! That’s an order!”

The guardsmen gave Hester one last shove, knocking her to the ground. Then they turned on

Helen.

“We don’t take orders from you, ye foreign bitch!” slurred the largest of the men, as they all drew
their weapons. “GET HER!”

And in the second it took for Helen to activate her biotics, Hester transformed. Her mouth opened
far too wide. Her face distorted as it pushed itself up over her skull. Helen could actually hear the
pop of Hester’s jaw as it dislocated. The magma-glow of a rage demon seared flesh and clothing
from the inside out.

Aghast and clueless, Helen did the only thing she knew how to do. She placed Hester into a stasis field, slapped the guardsmen into a singularity, and screamed for help.

“SOLAS!” Helen shouted. “SEEKER!”

The commotion attracted the villagers, many of who shrieked in terror.

Helen couldn’t blame them. The half-Hester-half-rage-demon trapped in stasis was a horror show. A few recognizably human body parts remained. Hester’s mouth had been forced open far beyond its normal capacity, rippling and splitting the flesh as the demon emerged behind it. Rage’s tiny, malevolent eyes peered out through the woman’s teeth. Her left arm and leg were still humanoid, but blackened and charred.

Not two paces away, the blubbering guardsmen floated around Helen’s singularity. Urine, vomit and fecal matter orbited along with them, coating them all in a vile stew of their own waste.

In the middle of it all stood Helen, hands stretched towards the chaos, barefoot, freezing, and wearing only a nightgown.
Commander Rutherford was the first to push through the scrum. Solas, Leliana, and Cassandra were right behind him.

“HERALD!” Rutherford shouted in an accusatory tone. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

“Solas!” Helen nodded in the direction of Hester. “Can that be reversed?”

“Reversed? Are you mad?” The Commander’s eyes bugged out in disbelief at her request.

Helen ignored him, and looked instead at Solas, who shook his head. “No, Herald. At least, not in a way that this mage would thank you for.”

Leliana and some of her scouts began to push the crowd back.

Once the crowd was a safe distance away, Helen said, “Solas? Cassandra? On my mark.”

Solas and Cassandra got their weapons at the ready.

“Three, two, mark.” She released the stasis. Solas froze the abomination. Cassandra shattered it with a massive blow. Icy, meaty chunks scattered around the ground.

Meanwhile, four guardsmen still floated in the air, whimpering to be let down.

Commander Rutherford turned on Helen. “What in the Maker’s name happened?”

“I was in bed when these cowards started attacking her just outside my door! I ran out and ordered them to stand down. They drew their weapons on me, and then Hester...”

Helen waved her right hand at the grisly tableau of scorched and frozen pieces of flesh. A severed foot lay off to the side, the skin charred and cracked.

The sight of it frayed Helen’s self-control. She dropped the guardsmen onto the ground. “Why did
you do that to her? She wasn’t hurting anybody!”

Her biotics flared around her as she advanced towards the guardsmen.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she screamed in English. “You think you can just treat women like that? Look at what you did!”

She pointed at the remains of Hester scattered on the ground. “LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID!”

The guardsmen cowered on the ground as Helen raged, every vile insult she could think of pouring out of her.

Leliana and Solas appeared on either side of her. They both tried to pull her away, saying, “Come, Herald, it is over,” and “Please, falon, let us get you inside.”

Their words did not register and she shook off their hands. For at that moment, Helen was glad those guardsmen were terrified of her, glad they now felt some of the shame and fear they had inflicted on Hester.

She didn’t care that she was freezing half-to-death and wore only a nightgown. She only cared that these four guardsmen were an acceptable target for the unfathomable grief that threatened to drown her every single day since she’d arrived.

“TREVELYAN!”

Commander Rutherford’s voice cut through the noise of Helen’s fury.

She shut her mouth and damped down the biotics. The Commander’s expression was hard. He had drawn his sword.

Helen glanced one last time at her would-be attackers, then held out her left hand, as if in presentation. “Your men, Commander,” she said meeting Cullen’s gaze. His eyes narrowed a little, but he sheathed his weapon.

Helen allowed Leliana and Solas to lead her into her cabin and close the door behind them.

Solas bade her stand by the fire, then yanked the blanket off of her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. He stood to her left, while Leliana rummaged through the wine.

“I don’t want any wine, Leliana,” Helen said.

“Yes, but I do,” the Spymaster sighed, as she pulled a cork and poured three mugs of wine. “I think I’ve consumed more alcohol in the last few days than I have in the last few years”.

Outside of advisor meetings, Helen had not spoken to Leliana since their confrontation two nights ago. The only exception had been yesterday when Helen had sent everybody away to speak with Leliana alone before they interrogated Blackwall.

Leliana has confirmed for her that, yes, she knew Blackwall was not a Warden. Leliana knew his true identity but saw no need to reveal it at this point. His men adored him and the Inquisition needed his skills. “He’s a good man,” she’d said, “even if he isn’t what we expected.”

Helen had wanted to dig a little further, but they could hear Cassandra, Cullen, and Blackwall clomping down the staircase. So she’d asked the other question she’d had.

“Why do the Commander’s hands shake?”
“That is his story to tell, not mine,” Leliana had murmured before they were joined by the Commander, Cassandra, and Blackwall.

Now Leliana stood on Helen’s right, pushing a cup of wine into Helen’s hands. “Drink,” she ordered.

Helen swallowed some of the wine without tasting it and stared into the fireplace, her mind’s eye replaying Hester morphing into the rage demon. “I do not understand how such a thing could happen,” she whispered.

“It’s my fault,” Leliana said. “We knew those men have been holding a grudge since you killed Ivans. It never occurred to me they’d be smart enough to use somebody else to get to you.”

“No,” Helen fretted. “What I mean is, I don’t understand how Hester could be burned alive from the inside out!”

She turned to Solas. “You said demons were spirits driven mad when a rift pulled them involuntarily across the Veil. So, Hester was just, what--another type of rift?”

Solas shook his head. “No. Hester volunteered herself as a host. It is likely that demon has been trying to convince her for some time. Unfortunately, neither Hester nor the demon were strong enough to stay contained.”

Helen blinked rapidly against the confusion and fear that kept threatening to leak out of her eyes. “‘Abomination’ was one of the first words I learned on Thedas, but I never thought about what it really meant. That there’s a whole world filled with sentient beings just out of reach behind the Veil.”

“Yes,” Solas nodded cautiously.

Feeling overwhelmed, Helen took a long drink of wine. It felt like she had just put one small corner of a puzzle together, only to realize that the picture looked nothing like the box it came in, and that all of the pieces were sharp enough to cut.

“Nothing about this planet makes any goddamn sense,” Helen whispered.

The front door opened and Cassandra walked in. “I have news.”

Helen, Leliana, and Solas listened as Cassandra told them what she and Cullen had learned.

The guardsmen still blamed Helen for killing Ivans, but her prolonged absences and the passage of time had dulled the edge of their anger.

Then Cecelia talked to them earlier that evening at the pub. She told them Helen had “poisoned” her baby and that she wanted revenge.

The guardsmen wanted to kill Helen, but Cecelia pointed out that she still needed to close the Breach. She’d proposed an alternative - lure Helen out of her cabin and chop off her right arm. That way, she could still close the Breach, but would no longer get to use her “magic bracelet.”

Cecelia had chosen Hester because the woman had expressed disappointment that she had not been chosen for the Medical Corps. More importantly, Hester was so mild-mannered that nobody saw her as a threat.

Cecelia told Hester that evening that she’d overheard Helen say the Medical Corps needed another
mage right away. “Go talk to the Herald,” Cecelia had said. “She’s still awake.”

The plan was for the guardsmen to get a bit loud about blocking Hester’s path to Helen’s cabin. Helen would come outside to investigate. The men would attack, and avenge both Ivans and Cecelia’s baby.

But the guardsmen had gotten carried away in the fun of pushing Hester around.

“Even sober, those men are idiots,” Cassandra said. “And they had all been drinking. None of them had considered that any mage might turn into an abomination, or that the Herald could hold her own against four armed men.”

The men were locked into cells. Cecelia had been caught trying to sneak out of Haven. She, too, was placed in a dungeon cell. So far, she’d said nothing.

Leliana sighed, “I’ll go see if I can get anything out of Cecelia. Good night, everyone.”

After she left, Helen looked at Cassandra and Solas. “I’m going to recruit the mages,” she said.

“Even after what you just witnessed?” the Seeker asked.

“Especially after what I just witnessed.”

Cassandra looked resigned. “Very well, Herald.”

“I’m planning a hard ride back to Haven so I have time to repair the escape pod before the mages arrive,” Helen told her. “It’s a lot to ask, but I want you to come with me.”

Cassandra nodded once. “I will.”

Solas set his wine down and picked up Helen’s hand. “You should get some rest, falon. We all should,” he said as he healed it for the umpteenth time.

But Helen didn’t sleep. She brooded until sunrise, unable to dispel the nagging sense that Thedas was more fundamentally alien than anything she’d ever seen in the Milky Way.

**

“How will you punish them?”

It was the first thing out of Helen’s mouth the next morning in the War Room.

“We cannot hang them. Technically, they didn’t kill anyone,” Cassandra said. “Nor can we send them to the Wardens, even if we could find them. Not after what we saw at the Conclave.”

Josephine spoke up. “And Cecelia is pregnant, which complicates everything.”

“You should have killed them last night,” Leliana said.

“What, in front of the whole town?” Cullen said. “The villagers are scared enough of her as it is. At least this way it looks like she was only defending herself and Haven.”

“I was only defending myself and Haven,” Helen said.

“I know, but it doesn’t change the fact that you terrified a lot of people last night,” he said. “By sparing them, we can argue that you at least showed some restraint.”
“More than your men did, anyway,” Helen retorted, placing the responsibility back onto the Commander’s feathered shoulders. “Which brings me back to my question - how do you plan to punish them?”

Helen listened to several minutes of arguments, which ranged from banishment (Leliana and Cullen) to a few years in the dungeons (Cassandra and Josephine.)

When it became clear that Helen was expected to break the stalemate, she balked. “No. Absolutely not. You can’t complain that people are afraid of me, and then place the lives of those men into my hands. They are your men and, therefore, your responsibility, Commander. Banish them, hang them, I don’t really care. Just make sure it’s handled by the time I return from Redcliffe.”

“Redcliffe?”

The Commander was all kinds of outraged and aghast. “You’re recruiting the mages after what you saw last night?”

“I’m recruiting the mages because of what I saw last night. What those men did to Hester was unconscionable.”

“She made her choice, too!” Cullen argued. “No-one forced her to accept a demon’s help. If you hadn’t been there, that demon could have burned down half of Haven! How do you propose we prevent more abominations if we bring scores of mages to live right under the Breach?”

Helen wasn’t certain if the question was serious or rhetorical, but she found her posture instinctively falling into parade rest.

Commander Rutherford asked a question. Commander Trevelyan would answer it.

“I’d start by teaching your men that assault will never be tolerated against anybody, mages or otherwise. Institute guidelines with clearly laid out prohibitions and punishments. Hold inter-speciality training with the mages. Use team building exercises and send them out on joint missions.

“None of these are cure-alls, but they do reduce the frequency of such incidents. I’ve done it before with scores of different ground teams. I did it here with Company Half-Wit.”

“None of those groups included mages,” Cullen said.

“My Medical Corps has two, and they’ve been successful for some time now. Point the blame at Hester all you want, but those men had good reason to believe that abusing women was acceptable sport. That’s nobody’s fault but yours, Commander.”

Guilt flickered across the Commander’s face, and he looked away. “I know it is,” he said, quietly.

Helen softened her tone a little. “I’m not choosing the mages only because of what happened last night. Most of the mages we spoke to in Redcliffe hate being under Tevinter control. I’m not so much recruiting the mages as I’m rescuing them. If it works, the Inquisition has a small army of grateful, loyal mages.

“Lord Seeker Lucius thinks he’s too good for us. If we recruit the Templars, they’ll expect us to be grateful to them.”

Leliana nodded. “She’s right, Cullen. If the Inquisition is going to survive beyond closing the
Breach, we want people who believe in what we stand for.”

Cassandra said, “And if this Alexius is really playing with time travel, he poses a threat to everybody, not just the mages.”

“I don’t think what we saw in Redcliffe was really time travel,” Helen said. Then she opened the omnitool and showed them the vid she’d taken in Redcliffe, from the moment she turned on her omnitool in the Gull and Lantern, until she turned it off after Dorian Pavus left the Chantry.

“See? Look. Even when I get stuck in one of those spots where I slow down, the time on the omnitool doesn’t change. I get slower, but it’s only my motion that was affected, not time itself.”

Then she turned the omnitool off.

“Wait,” Cullen asked. “You can just record what anybody around you is saying or doing, and they don’t even know it?”

Oh. Shit. Helen had never thought about how that would look. “Um, yes. I suppose I can.”

“Are you recording this?” He indicated everyone around the War Table.

"No. Except for the Conclave explosion and the scene we just witnessed, I have not made any recordings without the express consent of the subjects."

“You didn’t get Fiona’s consent,” Leliana pointed out.

“Fiona asked me to meet her in a pub. How much privacy was she expecting, exactly?”

“How are we to know you won’t record us without our knowledge?” Cassandra asked.

"Beyond my word?" Helen shook her head. "You don't."

Silence settled around the table.

“I must admit, Helen, I am not comfortable with that,” Josie said. Helen could tell the others felt the same.

“Well, I, uh…” Helen floundered for a moment, unsure what to say, and decided brutal honesty was her only option.

“Where I come from, everybody had one of these,” she indicated her right wrist. “We all had the ability to record whenever and whatever we wanted. Most public spaces had systems in place which recorded everything night and day.

“But there were limits to what was considered ethical. The privacy of your own home, intimate moments, private conversations - those were all considered to be out of bounds unless the parties agreed. Recording those instances without consent was considered to be a deep breach of trust.

“I know first hand what it’s like to have that trust betrayed. I’m on Thedas because of it.

“There may be times in the field where I need to record what is happening. But I give you my word that absent exigent circumstances, I will not record anything without permission.”

Nobody liked that answer. Even Josie had a less-than-diplomatic frown on her pretty face.

Helen didn’t know what other reassurances she could give. They’d either learn she could be trusted
or they wouldn’t.

Cassandra broke the silence by saying, “This betrayal of trust - you are speaking of your former lover?”

Helen could not quite contain the disgusted sigh that escaped her. “Yes.”

Cassandra nodded once. “Very well. I will trust you in this matter, Herald.”

This seemed to mollify Leliana and Josephine a little bit, but Cullen looked confused.

“That ‘bad man’ you told us about the day you woke up, the one that sent you here,” Cullen said, realization dawning on his face, “that was your former lover?”

Helen looked at Cassandra. “You never told them?”

“No, I told them. I did leave out some of the more salacious details. Perhaps that is why the Commander does not remember.”

All three of the female advisors were watching Cullen carefully. He looked almost...confused. There was some sort of undercurrent among the advisors that Helen was evidently not privy to.

Then Cullen said, “What salacious details?”

“Fuck me. I hate me,” Helen muttered in English.

She switched to Common, and quickly sketched out what Clinton had done.

She wrapped up her summary with, “After we arrived in Andromeda, Clinton got into the habit of masturbating onto my cryo unit. He was caught, so he moved the cryo unit into an escape pod and blasted me into open space. Thousands of years later, I landed here.”

Commander Rutherford had turned absolutely scarlet. Helen might have felt sorry for him, if he hadn’t been such a prick the last few days.

“When I get to my escape pod,” she said, keeping her voice absolutely professional, “I can download the dozens of security vids of Clinton masturbating and show them to you. It isn’t the sort of thing you’re likely to forget.”

“That won't be necessary, Herald,” he said through clenched teeth.

Leliana laughed. “Dozens of times? Truly?”

“Truly,” Helen nodded. “A whole new galaxy but still so much time on his hands. It also illustrates what I was saying earlier. Surveillance was everywhere. Clinton had to know he was being recorded.”

“If he knew other people could see him,” Cullen looked both embarrassed and horrified at the same time, “then why would he...?”

This time, Leliana and Josephine laughed.

“We are here to discuss Redcliffe,” Cassandra reminded them all, quite sternly.

The Commander eagerly jumped into the change of topic. “I still think it’s a bad idea. Even Solas said that the Templars would be the better option for you.”
“He said both options would be dangerous. I chose the option that protects the mages, removes a hostile foreign power from your backyard, and secures the ability to close the Breach.”

“Even if it means you’re more like to die?” he asked.

Helen shrugged. “I should have died a long time ago. Everything on Thedas has just been borrowed time. Now, how are we going to do this?”

She had been invited to meet with Magister Alexius, which everybody agreed was a trap. An all-out assault was not feasible.

Helen asked about sneaking in. Leliana said that was possible. Difficult, but possible.

The Commander, naturally, didn’t like it. “It’s a huge risk,” he pointed out.

Then door to the War Room burst open, and a certain leather-clad mage with a penchant for guyliner strolled in.
“Fortunately,” Dorian declared, “you’ll have help.”
Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to my eternally patient and fantastic betas for their feedback. I cannot emphasize enough just how much they both help "Half-Life" come together.

Mikan, polarbaronness, and quarkoniumglowbug were all a huge help on the biology. Keep in mind that there's actual science and then there's lore. If I have to choose between the two, I pick the lore. If I've gotten anything about the actual science wrong, it's my fault, not theirs.

And we have another beautifully fantastic render from ProcrastiKate! She can be found at http://anna-trocity.tumblr.com.

Finally, I want to thank everybody who has left kudos, reviews, and comments. Thank you all so much for continuing to follow Helen on her journey.
Chapter forty-three

Dorian hated Haven the moment he set his eyes upon it.

This was partly his own fault, as he was in an atrocious mood. Getting to Haven had been much harder than he’d expected. High altitudes and bitter Frostback winds were not enemies he’d faced before. The best warming spells on his heaviest clothing couldn’t ease his shivering.

When he finally got to Haven, he’d been expecting the town to be more like its name. Warm. Welcoming.

Instead, he found training yards filled with soldiers. Tents served as barracks. The stables were right next to the blacksmith. Everything had a slapdash, temporary feel to it.

He stabled his indifferent horse. Then a Templar ordered - ordered! - Dorian turn over his staff.

“No weapons inside the gates, ‘cept for members of the Inquisition forces,” the Templar said.

“And I’m sure that if I were a noble and not a mage, you’d be jumping on me to turn over my sword,” Dorian mused.

The Templar grinned and pointed to a wall of weapon racks, lined with swords, staves, and mauls of various make. “I certainly would. Best part of my day, actually.”

“Fine,” Dorian said, handing over his staff, “but do keep it safe.”

Having been divested of his weapon, he found the most vacant-looking Inquisition soldier at the gates and asked to please be pointed in the direction of the Herald.

The soldier glanced at him briefly, and said, “Piss off.”

“Now, now, don’t do that, my friend,” Dorian said, as charmingly as he could. “She is expecting me.”

“Nah, she’s not.”

Dorian turned around. The speaker was that enormous Qunari. Despite the cold, the Qunari was wearing even less clothing than he had back in the Chantry at Redcliffe.
“See?” the soldier said, smugly. “She ain’t expecting you. Piss. Off.”

Dorian ignored the soldier and focused his attention on the Qunari. “I know how to get to Magister Alexius,” Dorian explained. “You don’t, and neither does the Herald. She’ll need my help.”

The Qunari gave him the same, slow once-over that he’d done back in Redcliffe.

Dorian let him look. If this half-naked Qunari wanted to admire him, at least he had better taste in men than he did pantaloons. Besides, he blocked the wind.

Finally, the Qunari stuck his hand out. “Pavus, right? I’m The Iron Bull, head of the Chargers. We met back in Redcliffe.”

They shook hands. The Iron Bull’s hand was so large and his skin so hot, that it took nearly all of Dorian’s self-control to not cuddle up against him.

“Nice to see you again,” he said politely.

“Take him to her,” the Iron Bull said to the soldier. “He’s got information she’s going to need about the Tevinter magister.”

“Thank you,” he said, giving a slight bow to the Iron Bull before he allowed the soldier to lead the way.

“Don’t thank me yet,” the Qunari called after him. “This isn’t the place for spoiled ‘Vints.”

He pretended he hadn’t heard. As he followed the soldier through Haven, Dorian schooled his face into a neutral cordiality that kept his disgust hidden.

“The Inquisition.” It sounded so impressive, didn’t it? Breaking away from the Chantry like it had? Its Herald was becoming famous - or infamous, depending on who you asked - for doing such grand things.

The reality disappointed him. He’d been expecting...well, he wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. More heated buildings. Fewer open sewers. Not some frozen, southern backwater.

Haven didn’t seem terribly impressed with Dorian, either. More than one resident looked him up and down and openly scoffed.

He was almost grateful to enter the Chantry, and when in his lifetime had he ever said that?

The soldier took him to a closed door in the back of the Chantry. Voices behind it argued about how to best break into Redcliffe Castle.

Dorian barged right in and declared, “Fortunately, you’ll have help!” The looks of shocked outrage on everybody’s faces improved his mood. He did so love making an entrance.

Only the Herald seemed unimpressed. “Pavus. How timely.”

She introduced him to the others. *The* Cassandra Pentaghast. Sister Leliana, who probably had two dozen small blades hidden on her person. An Antivan Ambassador with a name he recognized. And Commander Rutherford, who looked as if he’d like nothing better than to stab Dorian on
general principle.

The Herald listened to Dorian’s proposal to help infiltrate Redcliffe Castle and declared that it had merit.

The Commander didn’t like the plan very much. He felt it put the Herald at too much risk. Specifically, the risk was losing, “the only means we have of closing the rifts. I won't allow it!”
“Won’t allow it?” the Herald repeated, almost amused. “As if you could stop me, Commander.
Besides, my safety has never been important to you before, so I find it hard to believe that it concerns you now. You just don’t like the choice I’ve made.”

“No,” said the Commander stiffly. “I certainly don’t.”

“I don’t need you to like it, Commander. I need you to help me plan this mission,” she said. “If you’re unwilling to do that, you can go. You do have some problem employees downstairs. Perhaps dealing with them would be a more productive use of your time. I will not hold it against you.”

Dorian watched the exchange with great interest. The Herald’s tone was reasonable, yet her words made the Commander’s jaw clench. Dorian hoped that the Commander would keep arguing. Unfortunately, the man just stood there, looking stubborn.

“Moving on,” the Herald said, “how are we going to do this?”

It was decided that Dorian, Sister Leliana and some of her best scouts would leave that afternoon for Redcliffe. The Herald and a small ground team would follow a day behind. Dorian would help the Inquisition infiltrate the castle in the middle of the night. Once they entered the passage, they would not leave it until the Herald and her team were in place.

As soon as the meeting was over, the Commander stormed out of the room. The Herald just watched him and gave a resigned sigh. Then she turned to Dorian. “Come with me,” she said. “The Inquisition got its hands on some staves that I’m told are quite good. You may want to switch yours out for this mission.”

Dorian doubted it but kept his thoughts to himself.

On the way out of the Chantry, the Herald stopped to re-introduce him to Madame de Fer. The Enchanter had set herself up in the wings of the Chantry, where she held whatever passed for court here in the sticks.

The mages did a swift visual inspection of each other. Dorian could read the dislike on Vivienne’s face as quickly as she could read his.

An instant rivalry. This should be fun.

“Do be careful, Herald,” Vivienne sniffed. “Tevinters are not known for their good faith.”

“No, we certainly aren’t. But what we lack in faith, we make up for in actual talent.”

“Really?” the Herald. “Already? This may be a record.”

“What?” Dorian said as he followed the Herald out of the Chantry. “We were having a perfectly civil conversation.”

The Herald just sighed. As they walked through Haven, Dorian couldn’t help but notice the wide berth people were giving the Herald. Even the villagers who had scoffed at Dorian wouldn’t make eye contact now that he was with her.

She led him briskly towards the gates, until a voice called out, “Hey, Herald!”
A dwarf with dark blond hair and a broken nose waved her over. He glanced briefly at Dorian, but his focus was on the Herald. “You okay? That was some ugly business last night.”

“T’m fine. Thank you for asking.” She glanced back at Dorian. “Varric Tethras? Dorian Pavus.”

“Really?” Dorian said, shaking Varric’s hand. “We have a mutual acquaintance. Maevaris Tilani is a dear friend of mine.”

Varric chuckled a little darkly. “Maevaris Tilani,” he repeated. “You have formidable friends. How’s she doing these days?”

“She’s quite well, thank you. I will be sure to let her know we met. She speaks highly of you.”

“Well, send her my best,” Varric said. Then he explained to the Herald, “His friend is the widow of my cousin. Long story.”

“I’m sure you’ll embellish it for me if I ask nicely,” the Herald said, smiling fondly at the dwarf.

They said their goodbyes. The Herald led him outside of the gates and down to the blacksmith.

The Herald talked to the blacksmith, who brought out the strangest staff Dorian had ever seen. “Dwarven make,” the blacksmith said. “Excellent craftsmanship. Bloody powerful, too, from what I’m told.”

Dorian picked it up. The rush of willpower that flooded his system was almost dizzying.

“Maker’s breath, please tell me you don’t want this returned,” he pleaded, as they headed back towards the gates.

The Herald shrugged. “It’s yours for the duration of the mission. After it’s over, we’ll have to see where things are.”

Leliana was waiting with a small team of scouts. The Herald took her leave. “Good luck, Pavus,” she said. “I will see you in Redcliffe.”

**

As they traveled, Dorian eventually realized that Sister Leliana was that Leliana, friend and companion of the Hero of Ferelden. The warm, laughing bard of the stories bore little resemblance to the cold, calculating woman who now rode next to him and said almost nothing.

The Hero’s stories had not been widely believed in Tevinter. Entertaining, yes, and a fascinating tale, to be sure. But nobody actually believed it had been a true Blight. Most assumed the Hero had put down an overly aggressive excursion of darkspawn.

At any rate, Leliana’s past association with the Hero of Ferelden was not a topic of discussion. Despite his most charming efforts, every inquiry he’d made was rebuffed.

She was only slightly more forthcoming about the Herald of Andraste.

“So, who is she really?” he asked.

Leliana gave it some thought and said, “What is the most outlandish thing you’ve heard about
“That she is a mage from another world who can throw a man over a building, whilst invisible.”

“She’s not a mage, not the way we understand it,” Leliana said. “She calls her powers ‘biotics.’ The rest is true.”

“You’re joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“No, you look rather terrifying.”

That earned him a raised eyebrow, but no comment.

He pressed the issue. “But who **is** she? You can’t say, ‘not a mage from another world.’ That’s hardly an answer at all.”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

“Not if I can help it,” he said cheerfully. “I do so love the sound of my own voice.”

“You will see,” is all she would say on the matter. The rest of the Inquisition scouts ignored him, although he couldn’t tell whether it was because he was from Tevinter, or a mage, or just because they were following Leliana’s lead.

They rode hard to Redcliffe, reaching the Inquisition camp outside of Redcliffe in the early afternoon on the fourth day.

That night, long after sundown, Leliana led them to a dilapidated mill within the ruins of old Redcliffe. The passage into the Castle ran underneath the lake, something Dorian tried very hard not to think about.

It did not take long to run into trouble. Giant spiders had found the damp and the dark to their liking and had established a rather sizeable nest.

Dorian’s fire and Leliana’s arrows kept most of the spiders from getting too close, but a couple of the scouts received some nasty bites. Leliana passed out anti-venom to those in need. If that wasn’t a sign she’d been here before, Dorian didn’t know what was.

After clearing out the spiders, the obstacles became more complicated. They found their progress blocked by spells far too old to belong to Alexius. It was nothing that Dorian couldn’t handle, but putting down demons and corpses every time they turned a corner slowed them down and drained their energy.

Finally, they reached a reinforced door that resonated with a magical signature that Dorian recognized as distinctly Tevinter.

He put his finger to his lips, signaling the team to be quiet. Then he reached out with his magic.

“The door is triggered for fire. It’s got a bolt-action lock. And there are four guards inside,” he murmured to Leliana.
“Take care of the magic. We’ll get everything else.”

Dorian negated the fire rune, then watched Leliana noiselessly pick the lock. The four guards inside didn’t even have time to draw their weapons before they had arrows or blades in their throats.

The guards’ room opened into a small passage that led through a dungeon with empty cells. Room by room, they worked their way through the bowels of Redcliffe Castle. Leliana and her people were ruthless, efficient, and utterly silent.

The Veil in Redcliffe had been thin and damaged. Here in the Castle, however, the Veil felt injured, almost diseased. It set his teeth on edge.

Finally, they found themselves just outside the main hall of the Castle. They waited until they heard the Herald’s presence announced. Leliana and her scouts spread out.

Dorian entered the hall as if he had every right to be there. The Venatori, seeing just another mage from Tevinter, did nothing to him.
He watched from the back. The Herald had chosen the Seeker and the elf mage (Silas? No, Solas) to accompany her.

If the Herald had any diplomatic skills, she kept them well hidden. She told Alexius, in so many words, that she was taking his mages, and he could fuck off.

Alexius was not acquitting himself, either. He showed inexplicable hatred towards the Herald, even accusing her of stealing the Mark on her hand.

“The Mark?” she asked. Then she got quite angry, pointing her left hand towards Alexius and demanding, “What is this? What do you know about it?”

“It belongs to your betters,” Alexius said, in his most condescending tone. “You wouldn’t even begin to understand its purpose.”

When Felix said, “Father, listen to yourself. Do you even know what you sound like?” Dorian made his move.

“He sounds exactly like the sort of villainous cliche everyone expects us to be.”

Alexius and Dorian argued. Felix begged his father to stop whatever it was they were doing.

All the while, Dorian looked for the man he once knew in the petty tyrant who now stood before him, so eager to tear apart the world. Alexius was so caught up in his own justifications that he never noticed Leliana’s people quietly slaughtering his own guards.

Eventually, the reason behind Alexius’ madness became heartbreakingly clear.

“Stop it, Father,” Felix begged. “Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach, and let’s go home.”
Alexius turned to his only child and said, “No! It’s the only way, Felix. He can save you.”

“Save me?” Felix almost sounded angry.

“There is a way,” Alexius insisted. “The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the Temple…”

“I’m going to die, Father,” Felix said gently. “You need to accept that.”

For just a moment, Dorian thought Alexius would come to his senses. Then Alexius called the Herald “a mistake,” and pulled out a familiar amulet.

Alexius was going to try and cast time magic right here? Without any sort of preparation or grounding? Was he trying to kill them all?

Dorian shouted, “No!” and threw his strongest disruption spell at Alexius, but it was too late. A swirling vortex cracked open the fabric of the Fade and sucked Dorian and the Herald right into it.

They landed in filthy, shin-deep water. Two startled Venatori took the Elder One’s name in vain and drew their weapons. Dorian had no time to blink before the Herald’s strange, blue magic had thrown both men so hard against the wall he heard their necks break.

“What just happened? Where are we?” the Herald demanded of him.

Dorian looked around. This place seemed disturbingly familiar. Remove the refuse, the flooding, and the red lyrium, and it looked exactly like the dungeons he had just traveled through with Leliana and her people.

He hid his panic behind his scholarly facade. They had traveled through time, he explained, although he was not sure which direction. “But don’t worry,” he said, “I’ll protect you.”

The Herald looked up at him, incredulity written all over her face. Then she punched him on his unprotected bicep - hard.

“Ow!” he cried.

“What the bloody fuck is wrong with you?” she hissed. “We had Leliana, all of her scouts, and my ground team right behind us! Now it’s just the two of us in some red lyrium infected shithole where people want to kill us, and you think you can protect me?”

“This isn’t just any shithole!” he retorted. “This is the dungeon of Redcliffe castle! I was just here with your people.”

The Herald made a noise of disgust and slapped her right wrist. A bright orange gauntlet made entirely of light appeared over her forearm.

“Oh, what’s that?” he said, genuinely curious.

“An omnitool. If we’re going to die here, I’m recording it.”

“Ooooh, of course. ‘An omnitool.’ That clears up everything.”
She ignored him. She said something in a language he didn’t recognize, and the omnitool turned off.

She tried to open the door to the cell they were in, but it was locked. “Help me find a way out, so we can figure out exactly where we are,” she ordered.

“I told you already. We’re still in the castle. What we need to find out is when we are.” He helped her haul a dead Venatori out of the water and onto the steps.

“Time travel isn’t possible,” she said, although she didn’t sound quite as skeptical as she had the week before.

“Begging your pardon, madam, but it most certainly is.”

“If you’re going to travel through time,” she said as she searched the body, “you also have to travel through space. A planet always moves around its sun. Stars always move through their galaxies. Nothing ever stands still.

“If you travel through time, how do you guarantee that you don’t appear in the middle of a mountain? Or out in open space? Not to mention the massive amount of energy it would take.”

The guard’s pockets were empty. She unceremoniously dumped the body back into the water and reached for the second dead guard.

“Which is why you must both harmonize and anchor the Fade around you,” Dorian said, highly disconcerted to hear her describe time travel in such cold, non-magical terms. “The amulet was designed to do just that. The harmonization acts as a lifeboat, if you will, while the Fade provides both the direction and the energy. Of course, it was all just theory the last I worked on it. Alexius seems to have taken his research to exciting new heights.”

“‘Exciting,’ he says. Well, Pavus, if we really have traveled through time, I’ll add it to the long list of things I hate about your planet.”

“My planet?” he asked. “So, you’re sticking with this whole, ‘I’m from another world’ story?”

She stood up with a key in her hand, and said, “How do you fight?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Combat, Pavus. How do you fight?”

“Oh. Mid-range, mostly. I’m proficient in all elemental and spirit magics, as well as necromancy. I’m also quite adept at hand-to-hand.”

“What’s necromancy?”

“Are you serious?” he asked. The Herald narrowed her eyes at him, so he sighed impatiently and gave a textbookish answer. “I use the spirit energy of the dead and dying to my advantage. I can also use the bodies of the fallen to fight for me.”

“Adding it to my list,” she muttered, as she unlocked the cell door. It opened with a creak. “Alert me to any magical traps you sense. If you see hostiles floating, your offensive spells should disable
them. Stay reasonably close, and I can keep us both under a barrier.

“All right, let’s move out,” she ordered. Then she started to walk off.

“Move out’?” he repeated. “Who put you in charge?”

She stopped walking and very deliberately turned around to face him. She walked right back to him and poked him in the chest.

“Me. I’ve been in charge since before you arrived in Haven. This is my mission, not yours. So here are your options. You either follow orders or –” she tapped her wrist and vanished.

Dorian looked around in a mild panic.

“Or you wait here by yourself.” The voice came from the other side of the room.

“Fine,” he growled.

She reappeared at the bottom of the stairwell, a look of barely contained fury on her face. He walked over to where she was, and made a sarcastic flourish of his hand, as if to say, after you.

The dungeon did not improve as they made their way through it. Broken pipes, rubbish everywhere, and the stench of rotting bodies had turned Redcliffe Castle from a rural stronghold into an utter nightmare. The constant, dissonant hum of red lyrium was giving Dorian a headache.

“What do you know about this Elder One?” she asked.

“The leader of the Venatori, I expect. Probably some Tevinter magister aspiring to godhood, no doubt.”

“Yeah, no doubt,” she muttered.

They found one of the Redcliffe mages chanting to himself in a cell. He seemed unaware of their presence.

Most of the people they found, however, were quite dead, their bodies discarded and forgotten. Several were partially covered in red lyrium.

Anytime they found a body, the Herald would squat on the balls of her feet and use her omnitool to shine a cone of orange light on it.

“What are you doing?” he asked her.

“Scanning them.”

“Why?”

“I’m gathering information.”

“About?”

She looked worried. “I don’t really know yet.”
The fifth or sixth time she scanned a body, she gasped.

“I know her,” she whispered, touching the woman’s short, blond hair. Red lyrium was slowly devouring the body.

The Herald fiddled with her omnitool, and the orange cone of light turned into a rectangular projection. She tapped on the box below it.

Dorian tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but he didn’t recognize the technology. It wasn’t dwarven make. He’d certainly never seen anything this advanced from the Qunari. It had nothing to do with the Fade or lyrium.
Maybe she really is from another world. A world where they grow short, bossy, humorless women.

A three-dimensional image of a fetus appeared where the rectangle had been. The Herald asked a few questions in her language. Then she turned the omnitool off and placed a shaking hand over her mouth. She closed her eyes for a moment.

“Was she a friend of yours?” he asked. He tried to keep his voice at least polite. The Herald might be unpleasant, but that was no reason to be callous if she was now mourning someone.

“No. She hated me.” The Herald stood up and looked down at the body. “When I examined her less than a week ago, she was seven months pregnant. But according to the omnitool, she gave birth to a full-term baby ten months ago. Which means...”

“It’s been a year since you examined her,” Dorian supplied, sounding a tad smug.

“Yes,” she exhaled. “In my world, time travel was considered to be physically impossible. The clock on my omnitool didn’t record it happening. It still isn’t recording it now. Time and again, since I arrived on Thedas, I’ve been confronted with forces I don’t understand. Because this isn’t my world. It’s yours.”

She looked up at him, exhaustion and regret pulling at her features.

“I should have listened to you,” she said. “I owe you an apology, Pavus. I am sorry. Truly, I am.”

An apology? That was...unexpected.

“Please, call me Dorian. If it helps at all, this isn’t how I wanted to see my theories confirmed,” he said.

“I’m Helen. And this isn’t how I wanted to be proven wrong. Can you get us back? I was always taught that, even if time travel were theoretically possible, it could only ever move forward and never into the past. One of my physics teachers liked to say, ‘you can’t uncrack an egg.’”

“Nonsense. Not only can I uncrack an egg, I can make it cook itself and jump onto your plate.”

“That’s a repair, not time travel. And it doesn’t answer my question - can you get us back?”
“I’ll need to find Alexius first, or at least, the amulet he used to send us here. But theoretically, yes - I can get us back.”

“All right, then. We find Alexius or the amulet, and get back to the present day. In the meantime, I’m going to treat this Castle and everything in it like one giant crime scene.”

“You know, you’re very strange. Who are you really?” Dorian asked. “I know what everybody else says, but I’ve never asked you. Who are you?”

“Commander Helen Trevelyan, Andromeda Initiative, formerly Systems Alliance Navy.”

“Where are you from?”

“A planet called Earth.”

“Hmm. ‘A planet called Earth.’ And where is that, exactly?”

“The Sol System.”

“Right. Not one answer you’ve given makes any sense at all. I’ll try something more basic. How old are you?”

“That’s hard to explain. Look, get us back to where we were, and I’ll answer every question you have, I promise. But not here, and not now.”

She looked back down at the dead woman. “I wonder what happened to her baby?”

“Nothing good, I expect,” Dorian said.

“No, probably not,” she quietly agreed. “Let’s move out.”

This time, Dorian didn’t argue.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. I am still getting used to writing in Dorian's voice, and they were both provided much-needed feedback.

And we have another beautiful render by ProcrastiKate! (Helen kneeling while Dorian looks on is her work, and it is perfection.)

Finally, thank you to everybody who has left Kudos, comments, and reviews. I am so grateful you are joining Helen on her journey!
Chapter forty-four

Chapter Summary

Dorian and Helen search the rest of Redcliffe Castle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-four

Alexius’ accusation back in the Grand Hall that Helen had “stolen” the Mark had momentarily confused her.

“The Mark?” she’d repeated, sounding a bit stupid. Why would this Elder One give one single shit about the Mark?

Then it hit her. Alexius hadn’t set this trap. Corypheus had. He hadn’t died at the Conclave any more than he had in the Deep Roads. The intake of breath from Cassandra told Helen that the Seeker had just made the same realization.

Helen had stalled for time with angry demands about the Mark, and felt a trickle of relief when Dorian appeared.

If we can just get this over with, I can talk to Leliana and Cassandra. Then the three of us can decide what happens next.

“What happened next” was that Alexius shattered one of Helen’s fundamental beliefs about the universe.

Time travel wasn’t physically possible. That was a given. Every single advanced race in the Milky Way had come to this conclusion independently.

But she wasn’t in the Milky Way anymore. Here in Andromeda, death wasn’t final, and time travel was real. Everything she’d ever known was now up for question.

So, Helen apologized to Dorian. It was the least she could do.

She led them through the dungeons in a search-and-preserve pattern. Along the way, she asked a few more questions of Dorian, testing his knowledge of the “Elder One.” Beyond his (correct) assumption that it was a Tevinter Magister making an ill-advised power grab, he seemed genuinely in the dark about it all.

The closer they got to the surface, the hotter the Mark burned.

They faced little resistance. Helen scanned bodies, red lyrium, and any writings they found.

Umbralis 9:41 Dragon
Subject is a heavily pregnant human female who appears to be in her mid-twenties. She is one of the few survivors of the Elder One’s glorious victory at Haven. We spared her life when she informed us that her baby will be a new sort of mage.

A few quick tests have confirmed that her unborn child is likely to be gifted with magic. We also detected the presence of an unknown substance in the child’s body. Subject said this substance was the source of the Herald’s power.

Subject has been led to believe that she is under our protection. She will work in the kitchens until she gives birth. I will make arrangements to place the infant with a suitable family in Tevinter.

**Verimensis 9:42 Dragon**

Subject gave birth to a healthy baby boy this morning.

Labor and delivery were noteworthy. Blue, flickering light frequently surrounded the subject during contractions.

Within moments of birth, the infant gave a great wail. Several objects in the room (a table, a knife, and the chamber pot) levitated. The items fell to the ground as soon as the babe was put to breast.

Given this child’s remarkable potential, I have reassigned the boy to a more prestigious adoptive family. He will be removed from subject’s care tomorrow and sent to Minrathous with several guards and a wet nurse.

Subject’s unpleasant disposition makes her ill-suited for slavery. She is to be reassigned to the experimentation wing of the dungeon.

“That poor child,” Dorian murmured. “If he’s talented, he’ll be shown off like some exotic pet. If he’s not, he’ll be a southern barbarian charity case. Either way, he’ll always be an outsider in Tevinter.”

“Do you think it’s safe to bring these papers back with us?” Helen asked. “Some of these journals have a lot of information in them, especially about this Elder One.”

Dorian gave it some thought. “It’s tempting, but I think not. The red lyrium makes the air feel, I don’t know. *Infected*. Bringing anything back from this place seems like an invitation for more trouble than we need.”

They moved into another wing. Helen heard Cassandra’s voice, distorted but still clearly hers, reciting the Chant of Light.

The Seeker was curled up on the floor, her eyes lit from within by red lyrium. She fell into self-recrimination as soon as she realized Helen and Dorian were indeed alive.

“I have failed you!” she cried.

“No,” Helen insisted as she opened the cell door. “You never failed me. If anything, I failed you. I should have listened to all of you about time travel. I didn’t, and we were caught unawares,” she said.

“The Elder One,” Cassandra said. “He is Corypheus. You vanished before I could--”
“I know. I heard it, too. Here, drink this.” She handed Cassandra a couple of restoration potions.

“Who’s Corypheus?” Dorian asked.

“One of the Magisters Sidereal,” Helen responded.

He gave a quiet bark of skeptical laughter, but the mirth on his face vanished when he realized Helen and Cassandra were serious.

Then his eyes widened with anger. “That’s why you’ve been questioning me about the Elder One. You were digging for information, to see if I knew about any of this!”

Helen nodded. “You’re a Tevinter mage, and I’m grasping at straws.”

She turned back to Cassandra. “What did happen?”

The news got worse with every word the Seeker uttered. With Helen gone and believed dead, Corypheus had marched on Haven and crushed the Inquisition. He’d raised a demon army and killed Empress Celene. Much of the world was now in ruins.

“Can you fight?” asked Helen. “We need to get to Alexius, and go back in time to prevent this from ever happening.”

“I will fight. Are you recording right now?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Show us when you get back. Do not let us look away.”

“I won’t,” Helen promised. “Where’s Solas?”

“At the other end of the wing.”

Helen walked away, her heart pounding at what she might find. Dorian started to follow, but Cassandra held him back, saying, “Give them a moment of privacy.”

“Were they lovers?” Dorian quietly asked Cassandra.

“No, but they were very close.”

Close. There was that word again.

They had become even closer on the trip to Redcliffe. Helen had pulled Solas aside the night they’d left. She’d told him about his bizarre DNA scan, and her concern that he was at a higher risk for developing cancer.

The news had unsettled him. Conflicted eyes had searched hers as if he was looking for answers. Then he’d murmured, “The fate of the entire world rests on your shoulders, and yet you worry for me. Do not burden yourself over my health. You have far more important matters deserving of your attention, ma falon.”

Solas had been extremely solicitous towards her for the entire trip, almost fussy. He’d made sure she had plenty to eat. He’d healed her hand so frequently, without being asked, that Helen had concluded he’d just wanted a reason to touch her. He taught her Elvish in the evenings after supper and did not stop her from leaning against his shoulder while she listened to his voice.
Just this morning, he’d even taken over her watch early, so she could get plenty of sleep before facing Alexius.

Except for Solas, it had not been this morning. It had been a year ago.

She found him in the farthest cell at the very end of the wing, pacing like a caged animal. His eyes glowed so violently, filaments of red-lyrium-light radiated from his sclera.
“Solas.”

He spun around. “You’re alive!” he said, astounded. “We saw you die!”

“No. You only saw us disappear.” Helen used the prison key to open the cell door. “Alexius sent us forward in time. We just got here. Dorian is with Cassandra now.”

He looked at her over, the shock on his face quickly dissolving into acceptance and hope. “Can you reverse the process? You could return and obviate the events of the last year. It may not be too late!”

“We’re going back, or we die trying.”

He noticed the Mark glowing bright. “I cannot heal your hand any longer, falon,” he apologized. “It might spread the corruption to you through the Mark.”

Her hand was getting worse, but she’d chop it off herself before she’d risk this fate. “I’ll survive. I’m more worried about you.”

“I am dying, but it is no matter.”

Helen looked over his ruined body and said, “Ir abelas, Solas. I should have listened to you about time travel. I could have prevented-”

“No,” he interrupted. “The fault was mine. It was my job to advise you on magic, not yours to prevent a crisis you could not have foreseen.”

Then he looked at her as if he was trying to decide something. “Are you recording this?”

She nodded.

“Stop recording for just a moment, my friend. I would speak with you privately.”

She paused recording. “All right. We have privacy.”

Solas stepped close until they almost touched. His eyes looked like malfunctioning cybernetics. The skin around them had blackened. It all seemed so wrong and out of place on a face that looked at her with such a tender, regretful expression.

Then he placed his hands on her shoulders and whispered in Elvish, “I have lost many people in my life, but few cut as deeply as losing you.”

Helen felt the tears being to prickle at the back of her eyes.

“Cassandra eventually told me that you had always understood every language, even from the beginning.”
Helen nodded. “Are you angry?”

“Not in the least, but I am curious - why did you ask me to keep teaching you?”

“Because I liked spending the time with you.” No reason to hide that fact, not anymore.

“As did I, far more than I let you know. You brought me joy I never deserved, and wisdom I never appreciated. Like a fool, I squandered the time we had.”

“Solas,” she began.

“Hush, fenorain. It took watching you die before me, and long months in this prison before I saw what you knew all along. You have learned things about Thedas that will upset people, people you hold dear. Hold onto your truth, no matter who fights it.”

Then he kissed her forehead. “Ir abelas, Helen Trevelyan,” he murmured. “You deserved a better fate than correcting the terrible mistakes of others.”

Helen placed her hands on his waist and leaned her forehead into his chest. Whatever waited for her if Dorian got them back, this Solas was forever lost to her.

Don’t cry, don’t - her mantra dried up as Solas wrapped his arms around her and murmured, “Ir abelas, ir abelas.”

She tried to close her throat against it, but a single sob escaped her heart.

Then she stood up straight, wiped her eyes dry and squared her shoulders. She was Commander HelenFuckingTrevelyan, and she had to a mission to complete.

“I’ll make this count,” she promised. As they left his cell, Helen raised her wrist to her mouth and said, “Resume recording.”

They found Dorian and Cassandra in a small room near Cassandra’s cell. Cassandra was strapping on her greaves. Solas’ armor and staff lay on top of a chest.

“This armor confused the Venatori,” Solas said. His hands shook a little as he buckled his armor. “They could not decide if I was from an alienage or Dalish. I told them the truth--that I was neither--but they never believed me.”

Helen fished two more restoration potions from her pockets and pressed them into his hands.

“Do not waste potion on me,” he said. “Save it for yourself and for Dorian in the fights to come.”

“I need you strong for the fights to come. Take them. That’s an order.”

“I’ve already learned not to argue with her,” Dorian said. “She’s extremely bossy about being in charge.”

“So she is,” Solas smiled softly at Helen.

Once Cassandra and Solas were as prepared as they could be, Helen said, “I hate to ask this, but I need to scan you both. Any information I can take back might help prevent this from happening.”

They both agreed, and Helen did a quick, full-body scan of them.

As they headed out, Dorian said, “I’m surprised to find you both unguarded.”
“Solas and I have not been model prisoners,” Cassandra said with grim satisfaction.

“No, we certainly have not,” Solas agreed. “Alexius lost scores of men before he realized that locks and starvation were better jailers than guards we could disarm and kill. But the closer we get to Alexius, the more resistance we will find.”

A few Venatori stood guard outside another prisoner wing. Dorian and Helen dispatched them with little effort.

Inside, they found Fiona trapped in red lyrium from the chest down.
Fiona, astonished at their arrival, nevertheless confirmed that they had disappeared a year before. Alexius worked for the Elder One. “No one challenges him and lives,” she told them.

As Dorian and Fiona spoke, Helen scanned Fiona to see if there was a way to free her from the red lyrium.

She couldn’t. Red lyrium latticed through Fiona’s nervous system and penetrated the marrow of her bones. Lyrium scaffolding encased her heart, and filaments corkscrewed up into her brain stem.

“I am so sorry, Fiona,” the Herald said, “but I cannot break you out of this without killing you.”

“The red lyrium. It’s a disease,” Fiona explained. “The longer you’re near it, eventually you become this. Then they mine your corpse for more.”

“Do you want me to end this for you now?” Helen gently offered. “It will be painless and instant.”

“No. I brought this fate upon myself. I cannot burden you with such a task.”

Finally, Fiona told them that Leliana was somewhere in the castle, and begged them to prevent this from ever happening.

Then they left her behind, trapped in her living coffin.

“If red lyrium is a disease,” Dorian wondered as they made their way upstairs, “why is it growing out of the walls?”

His question received no answer, and soon enough, they were skirmishing again.

The Venatori they encountered seemed confused and shoddily trained. The castle was filled with rubbish. Helen had the overwhelming sense that Alexius had lost interest in whatever he was doing here.

Leliana’s defiant voice rang down the hallway. They followed it to a closed door. They busted into a filthy, blood-spattered torture chamber. Leliana hung from chains, as a Venatori slapped her and demanded information.

The moment the Venatori scumbag was distracted by the arrival of Helen’s team, Leliana wrapped her legs around her torturer’s neck and strangled him.

Helen freed the Spymaster, who accepted their arrival with seething clarity. No, she didn’t want to know how they’d gotten there. No, she would not be scanned. No, she would not be making small talk with Dorian.
The last year had burned away the woman she had once been. All that remained was an avatar of vengeance.
By the time they made it to the ground floor, Helen’s left hand felt like it was trying to turn itself inside out. The reason became evident as soon as they stepped out into the courtyard.

The Breach was everywhere.

They ran into a rift and fought a few waves of demons before Helen managed to get it closed. Afterward, Solas lamented, “The Veil is shattered. There is no boundary now between the world and the Fade.”

“Then why are there still rifts?” Helen asked.

“The Fade itself is damaged beyond repair.”

Helen made sure to capture the sky, slow-panning the entire horizon.
Solas came to stand next to her as she did so. In quiet Elvish, he said, “This is what happens when men act like gods.”

Once they reached the castle, they battled more often. Venatori and demons beset them at every turn.

Solas, Leliana, and Cassandra fought as hard as they could, but a year of torture, starvation, and imprisonment had taken their toll.

Luckily, Dorian was quick enough on the uptake that he almost made up the difference. Not only did he warn the team about Venatori tactics, he quickly saw the best way to combine his magic with Helen’s biotics. If Helen threw a Singularity, Dorian placed a fire rune directly underneath it, resulting in a fiery vortex of death. If Dorian created a wall of fire, Helen threw enemies into it.

And when it came to hand-to-hand combat, Dorian was a flat-out brawler. Helen had not appreciated just how large a man he was until she watched him raise his staff over his head and crack open the skull of a Venatori.

“Where did you learn to fight?” she asked him in between skirmishes.

“The Minrathous party circuit. The Season was always so dull without a few murders.”

He continued to make superficial small talk, trying to lighten the tension. The frivolous chit-chat grated on Helen’s nerves. She finally placed a hand on Dorian’s arm and shook her head. Solas, Cassandra, and Leliana would die that day to send Helen and Dorian back, and all of them knew it.

His mustache frowned, but he got the message.

The more they fought, the harder it became to preserve evidence. Helen did what she could. Even among the atrocities that surrounded them, a few things stood out.
The Venatori had been experimenting with the Blight--either giving it to healthy people or transplanting healthy tissue into people already infected. “Prisoner Leliana has been the most useful source of blood and skin to date,” read one journal entry.

“Why would they do this?” Helen wondered.

“Looking for a way to cure Felix, no doubt,” Dorian said. “You can only postpone the corruption for so long.”

They also found Alexius’ journal. He had tried many times to travel back to “before the Conclave, before Felix’ caravan was attacked by darkspawn, before the Venatori arrived in Minrathous.”

But he could never go any farther back than the Conclave explosion. The Breach itself provided the power that had made time travel possible, but it also acted as a hard boundary to anything before its existence.

By the time they made it to Alexius himself, Helen had partially numbed herself to the horror surrounding them. It allowed her to look at the shell that was Felix, and attempt a bargain - the amulet for Felix’s life.

It was all for naught. Leliana had her revenge anyway and slit the boy’s throat. Alexius opened rifts and called demons, but in the end, he fell just like the rest.

Dorian wanted an hour to reverse the spell. He didn’t get it. Within minutes of Alexius’ death, a horrible, deafening screech announced the arrival of the Elder One.

Cassandra and Solas left to hold the outer door to buy Dorian some time. Cassandra seemed dazed, as if she couldn’t quite believe she was about to die.
But Solas - Solas knew *exactly* what was about to happen. The last look he gave to Helen was one of profound, almost apologetic, sorrow.
Then he was gone.

Leliana recited the Chant of Light as Dorian frantically worked with the amulet.

Helen just stood there, feeling utterly helpless.

When the Elder One’s minions breached the doors, a terror demon tossed Cassandra’s broken body on the ground. Behind the crush, a Revenant threw its head back in a triumphant shout as it hoisted Solas’ headless corpse on its’ sword.

It took Helen a moment to recognize the horrified sobs as her own.

She threw a Singularity into the path of the horde, but that was about all she could do. As Dorian dragged Helen through the rift, Leliana’s eyes burned into hers, their message hard and clear.

_Don’t you dare waste this sacrifice._

And then, in a blink of rushing air, they stood in Redcliffe Castle. The pain in Helen’s left hand lessened, although it did not disappear. It was almost as if they’d never left.

Except, of course, Helen and Dorian were covered in blood, gore, and ichor.

Helen allowed herself a single glance to confirm that Cassandra and Solas were indeed alive and healthy. Then she faced Alexius, who now knelt on the floor.

She wanted to rage at him, wanted to open up the omnitool right there, and show him what he had done. She _especially_ wanted him to see Felix, dead on the ground, his mind and body wasted away by his father’s misdeeds.

But Felix himself knelt down next to his father. In strong, gentle terms, he told his father that he had made his peace with his fate.

The young man’s dignity and grace stayed Helen’s angry words. Alexius deserved to see the consequences of his actions, but Felix did not.

So, she kept her mouth shut and focused on other increasingly pressing issues. Now that she no longer had the adrenaline of combat coursing through her veins, her bladder demanded to be emptied. Her stomach growled. Her throat was parched with thirst. She was exhausted, and a glance at Dorian told her he was, too.

_Make arrangements with Fiona. Check in with Leliana and Cass. You’re almost done, Trevelyan. Finish this up, then you can pee, bathe, eat, and cry yourself to sleep._

The sound of marching boots scuttled Helen’s plans. A color guard of heavily armored soldiers cleared the floor. Almost everybody else began to bow or kneel.

A man about Helen’s age walked towards them. Dorian tugged on Helen’s arm. “Bow, ” he hissed. “Curtsey. _Something!_ That’s the _king!_”

Helen folded her arms across her chest and watched the tall, lanky ginger approach.

King Alistair scolded Fiona for giving Redcliffe to a Tevinter Magister and banished them from Ferelden. Fiona looked utterly heartbroken as she stared at the King.

Helen offered the mages the protection of the Inquisition. “You aren’t prisoners,” she warned, “but you’ll have to earn the trust of the Inquisition. For the moment, you’re our allies, not our
conscripts.”

From behind her on the dais, Cassandra muttered, “We will discuss this later, Herald.”

“I look forward to it, Seeker.” Helen meant it. Cassandra’s scowls were officially a thing of beauty, after what Helen had just witnessed.

Finally, I can pee and bathe and--

“Your Highness!” Leliana’s voice - happier and younger-sounding than Helen had ever heard - rang through the Great Hall.

“Leliana!” Alistair and Leliana embraced affectionately, clearly old friends.

“Maker, look at you!” Alistair held Leliana at arm's length. “What’s this getup all about? It’s terrifying!”

Leliana smiled for a moment, then said, “Did you get my letter?”

The king’s infectious smile melted away. “Yes. I did.” He looked at Helen, his face hard. “Herald, we need to talk.”

Leliana looked at Helen and hitched her head as if to say, follow me.

Helen brought her wrist up to her face and said, “stop recording.” Then she followed her Spymaster and the King of Ferelden into a small, mostly empty room behind the throne.

As soon as the door was bolted, the King said, “Leliana says you can show me exactly what happened at the Conclave.”

Helen looked around for a chair to sit in but none were to be had. She was filthy, thirsty, and ravenous. And she desperately had to pee. The last thing she wanted to do right now was play politics.

“No.”

"Herald!” Leliana gasped.

Helen ignored her. "Alexius sent us into the future. Dorian and I have been fighting for hours to get back. I’m exhausted, my biotics are shot, and I need to pee, like, right now.”

“Helen!” Leliana hissed. “You don’t just speak like that to the king!”

“He’s not my king, I didn’t vote for him,” Helen said.

Leliana’s fingers twitched, like she was about to reach for every knife she had in her possession and throw them into Helen.

Alistair, however, didn’t look the least bit offended. “Yes, Leliana, exactly! She didn’t vote for me,” he repeated.

He looked Helen over, his eyes lingering on the bloodstained armor and the drying ichor in her hair.

He inclined his head in her direction and said, “My apologies, Herald. I was unaware you’d just come from battle. A moment please.”
He opened the door and spoke to somebody.

Meanwhile, Leliana was glaring holes into her. “You said time travel wasn’t possible.”

“Yeah. I was wrong,” Helen admitted in a low voice. “By the way, Corypheus is the Elder One. Cassandra and I both realized it during the negotiation. Dorian learned it during our little jaunt into the future. Alexius probably doesn’t know that we know.”

Alistair returned and said, “Follow Lieutenant Smythe here. She’ll get you set right.”

“And Dorian?”

“He’s being attended to, as well.”

Then his face and voice hardened just a little. “Take care of whatever needs you must, but be back within the hour, Herald.”

Helen followed Lieutenant Smythe. It took all of her willpower not to grab her crotch and hop.

“Well,” Helen heard Alistair say to Leliana, “she’s lovely.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks are due, as always, to my outstanding betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. They are tireless in their efforts, and this story would not exist without them.

This was one of those chapters where I had a million screenshots, so ProcrastiKate was able to take a break on this chapter.

As a heads-up, real life is still kind of kicking my butt right now (but in a good way!). Progress on newer chapters has slowed to a crawl, but even a crawl is forward movement.
Chapter forty-five

Chapter Summary

Helen's filter breaks down and Dorian writes a letter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-five

Lieutenant Smythe stoically led Helen to the privy, as Inquisition soldiers and the King’s men dragged Venatori bodies out of various rooms. Even over the shrieking of her bladder, Helen’s brain registered at least a dozen corpses in the two hallways she walked through.

Goddamn, Leliana. Nice work.

The privy turned out to be a poorly-appointed garderobe - a small room that jutted out from the castle wall. It contained little more than a pitcher of water, a basin, and a stone bench, almost like a window seat. A covered hole cut into the bench allowed the waste to fall outside the castle and into a cesspit below.

As soon as the door was locked, Helen frantically unbuckled her armor, pulled up the lid, and sat down.

The relief she felt at getting to empty her bladder lasted about ten seconds. Then her butt started to freeze from gusts of lakefront winds that splashed some of her own urine back onto her skin.

She powered through the discomfort, and longingly remembered the bathrooms at the Grand Villa.

When she was done, she thoroughly rinsed her hands in cold water, then poured the water down the hole. She suppressed her irritation at the lack of soap and linens. This Castle has been under siege. Your mission isn’t complete. Don’t cry, don’t bitch, don’t blame.

Smythe led her back to the antechamber, where Leliana awaited her alone.

The Spymaster got straight to the point. “Look, Herald, I don’t know how things worked in your world, but you were just very rude to the King.”

“Kings were obsolete in my world. And rude was a better option than dropping trou and urinating on the floor.”

Leliana tsked a little, and said, “Alistair’s angry enough because of what the mages did. The Inquisition needs his support. Don’t antagonize him.”

“I didn’t antagonize him, I had to pee.”

Leliana shook her head and handed Helen a restoration potion. “Here. Drink this. You look like
you’re about to fall over.”

“I am. And thank you.”

Helen gratefully downed the potion, and the two women sized each other up. Leliana’s eyes were bright, and her skin glowed with good health.

“I found you in the torturer’s chamber, you know, in the future. They’d been running experiments on you, using your skin and flesh to see how it reacted to the Blight.

“You never broke. You never gave up any information. As soon as your torturer turned his back, you broke his neck, even though you were in chains. And in the end, you sacrificed yourself to make sure Dorian and I could make it back here.”

“Of course, I did. One small life in exchange for the whole world?” Leliana said brightly. “I always did love a bargain.”

“Well, it was damned impressive.”

Leliana shrugged nonchalantly.

Helen’s stomach growled. “How long do you think this will take with the King?” she asked.

Leliana handed Helen another potion.

Helen sighed and drank it. “What have you told him about all this?”

“The basics. He knows about you and how you got here. I explained what your omnitool is. And he knows what Varric told us.”

“Is this room secure? Will we be overheard?”

“Silencing runes,” Leliana twirled her fingers, to indicate the walls.

A few minutes later, Alistair walked in, closing the door behind him.

“Maker, Leliana, are there any Venatori left alive? Teagan is already complaining about having to ferry bodies across the lake for a mass burial.”

“Tell him to burn the bodies,” Helen said. “The Venatori have been using red lyrium, and you don’t want that underground growing unchecked. Bad enough it’s gained a foothold at Fort Connor.”

The king looked at Helen, his eyebrows raised. For a moment, she worried she’d offended him, but he said, “All right, I will. I believe you had something to show me.”

Helen queued up the vid of the Conclave explosion.

King Alistair watched the entire thing in silence, his face giving away almost nothing. His only reaction was a tightening around the eyes when he saw the Wardens.

When it was done, he asked, “Varric is positive it’s the same darkspawn magister?”
Helen and Leliana nodded.

“And he didn’t die in the Conclave explosion. He’s still very much alive. Alexius unknowingly tipped his hand earlier,” Helen added.

“Maker, what a nightmare,” he muttered. “What I’m about to tell you stays in this room, understood?”

Helen and Leliana nodded.

“I’ve been hearing the Calling for months. I can’t investigate it because I have a kingdom to rule. I can’t find any of the Wardens to ask after it. Even if I could, I doubt they’d talk to me because I’m no longer a Warden. But if all of the Wardens have gone missing all at once...”

“Maybe they hear it, too,” Leliana finished his thought. “Do you think it’s a false calling, like when Hawke encountered him?”

“No idea,” he said.

“Have you heard from Solona?”

“No, not for months.”

“Nor have I. I wonder if she hears it?”

As Leliana and the King talked, Helen had a nagging sense that she was missing a much, much bigger picture. Didn’t the Blight connect the Wardens and the darkspawn somehow? Was the Calling some kind of hivemind thing? Mass hysteria?

The longer she was on Thedas, the more opaque it became.

“Your Highness, would you mind if I scanned you?” Helen interrupted.

“Beg pardon?”

Helen turned the scanner on and scanned her own hand to show him. “It uses light to analyze information about any object that comes within range.”

“What sort of information?”

“In your case? Your biology. I haven’t scanned a Warden before. A baseline could be useful.” And it’s not like I can get it from Blackwall.

“What do I need to do?”

“Just stand there.”

“That’s something I’m really quite good at,” he grinned. He watched with interest as Helen ran a basic scan.

When she was done, he asked, “What else happened in this future you saw?”
Helen replayed the vid, fast-forwarding through non-critical parts.

Leliana gasped when she saw herself and covered her mouth with her hands. She spent the next several minutes like that, frozen in place as she watched, her eyes wide with horror.

The last few minutes of the future were the hardest to watch, but Leliana and Alistair reacted to something that Helen had given little thought to when it had occurred.

The Elder One’s arrival had been announced by a horrible, deafening screech. At the time, Helen had assumed it was just another demon.

But Leliana and Alistair both gasped and looked at each other with fear.

Helen completed the vid, showing them landing back in the present day. (Having to see the bodies of Solas and Cassandra, and to hear her own screams, did little to improve her mood.)

Finally, mercifully, it was over. Helen stopped the playback.

“Go back to that part with the screeching,” said the King.

Helen replayed it.

“Maker.”

“What was that?” Helen asked.

“An archdemon,” Leliana and Alistair spoke in unison.

“Oh,” Helen said. After a pause, she said, “And that’s bad because…?”

“Because it means there’s another Blight coming!” the King snapped.

Leliana said, “I don’t know about that, Alistair. I heard Alexius mention ‘this blighted world,’ but the Herald talked Cassandra, Solas, Fiona, and me. Not one of us said anything about a Blight. If it had been, that would have been the first thing I’d told you. Cassandra, too.”

Helen was ready to leave now. The King had the information he needed, and she was swaying on her feet with exhaustion and hunger.

Alistair, however, was too busy grinding his teeth to notice Helen’s fatigue. “Blight or not, you saw what happened! The Breach overtaking the whole world? A demon army marching on Orlais? Celene murdered?” He shook his head in disgust, and spat, “Grand Enchanter Fiona has so much to answer for.”

Helen felt a touch of ire at that. “As long as I close the Breach, that future never happens. And in Fiona’s defense, Alexius had to twist time to deceive her.”

“Deception or not, I gave the mages shelter. She thanked me by giving Redcliffe to a Tevinter Magister!”

“I’m not saying she’s blameless, but neither are you.”
“Herald!” Leliana hissed.

“No, no, Leliana! Let her speak,” Alistair said frostily. “Do tell me, Herald, how this is my fault.”

Helen kept her tone reasonable and calm. She had delivered unpleasant truths to senior officers for years. Alistair was no different. “Half the adults in your stronghold aren’t allowed to carry even the smallest of weapons. Hard to defend the village from foreign invaders when your monarch keeps you defenseless.”

“And you think a group of untrained elves with daggers and bows could have stood against Tevinter magisters and not been slaughtered? Well! Thank you so much, Herald, for popping by and telling me how to run my country!”

“I’m not telling you how to run your country. I’m pointing out a strategic flaw in your defenses. Your borders aren’t secure, and now Tevinter knows it.

“And for the record, I’m not the Herald of Andraste. I’m an Alliance naval officer who had the bad luck to land on the wrong planet at the wrong time.”

Alistair looked Helen over again from head to toe, anger and consternation evident in his gaze. “If you’ll excuse us, Herald, I need to talk to Leliana about you behind your back.”

**

Thank fuck. I can finally go. Helen turned on her heel and left.

**

Hullo, Maevie.

So, the good news--the Herald and I have stopped Alexius. We’re staying at the little tavern in Redcliffe tonight. We head back to Haven tomorrow.

The bad news? Alexius caused so much harm that I hardly know where to begin. The only thing he damaged more than the reputation of Tevinter is the Veil itself.

At least my time here has been exciting. It’s like a “who’s who” of Southern Thedas. Court Enchanter Vivienne has perched herself in Haven like some glittering spider. Varric Tethras is there, too (he sends his greetings, by the by). The Inquisition Spymaster used to run with the Hero of Ferelden. Cassandra Pentaghast travels with us.

Oh, and we bumped into the King of Ferelden. (You were right. He’s gorgeous.)

The Herald herself is the oddest person I have ever met. She calls her powers “biotics.” It’s all physical, no Fade involved at all. I swear to you, arrows bounced off her barrier.

She also claims to be from another world. I’m not sure I fully believe it yet, but her people certainly do.

But wherever she’s from, this woman has no manners at all.

For example, as we were trying to leave Redcliffe, an Inquisition scout informed us that our horses had been “temporarily stabled elsewhere, by order of the Spymaster,” and that two rooms
had been booked for us here at the inn.

That’s when the Herald confessed that she’d told the King of Ferelden that he shared the blame for losing Redcliffe to Alexius. Her logic? The King doesn’t allow alienage elves to carry weapons. Therefore, it was his own fault that he lacked able-bodied defenders.

And this happened after she’d refused to genuflect to the King. Can you imagine? I can’t decide if I’m impressed or embarrassed for her.

Now the Herald believes Leliana is keeping us here in Redcliffe so she can corner the Herald and berate her.

Felix stopped by earlier. He is holding up well, despite everything. Seeing him handle himself with such dignity after what Alexius has done...well, let’s just say that boy the only reminder I have left of the man Alexius used to be.

Do take care of yourself, amicus. I will write to you soon, I promise.

Much love and all that rot,
Dorian

P.S. The wine here is so awful that I’m drinking ale. Ale, Maevie.

Dorian blew on the ink until it was dry, then folded the letter. He would send it out tomorrow.

At the moment, he had the room to himself. Solas was in the room next door with Helen and the Seeker. Apparently, their little jaunt into the future had dissolved all of the wards that kept the mark from spreading. Now they needed to be replaced.

Dorian guzzled the rest of the ale, which was proving itself entirely inadequate for the task of getting him drunk.

He desperately wanted to get drunk. The Fade would not be kind to him tonight.

A single firm knock interrupted his thoughts. He opened the door to find Leliana.

“Follow me,” she said without preamble, and he followed her into the room next to his.

Solas, Helen, and Cassandra all sat at a small table. Helen’s head rested on her outstretched left arm, her left hand cradled in both of the apostate’s. She seemed to be asleep. Solas’ eyes were closed in concentration, as he bathed her hand in spirit energy.

Leliana closed the door and said, “We need to talk.”

The spirit energy in his palms faded as Solas opened his eyes. Helen, however, did not wake. Leliana stepped over and gently shook her shoulder.

Helen startled, sitting upright as blue light flickered around her hands. It only took her a moment to realize where she was, and she calmed down.
“Leliana,” she said wryly, rubbing her eyes. “Here to scold me in front of the whole class?”

Leliana tilted her head to one side, then sat down on the end of one of the beds.

“Yes. Alistair is my friend. He’s also a good king, and you didn’t tell him one single thing he didn’t already know.

“Alistair made elves a part of his court council. The Denerim nobility has never forgiven him for it. The provision against city elves carrying weapons has been in place for centuries. He’s never enforced it. If Alistair were to suddenly declare that weapons were allowed in the alienages, there is a real risk that human mobs would burn the alienages to the ground. It has happened time and time again, all over Thedas.”

Helen looked contrite, and said, “Ah. I did not know that history.”

“I know you didn’t, which is why I specifically asked you not to antagonize him. If you had spoken like that to any other monarch in Thedas, I couldn’t have smoothed it over.”

“I apologize, Leliana. You did give me that advice, and I ignored it.”

“The good news is, Alistair is no longer angry with you. I pointed out that we had just secured his holdings at no cost to himself. We took the rebel mages off of his hands. We now have a chance to avoid that dark future you recorded. We just saved his kingdom, and he knows it.”

“Then why prevent us from leaving?” Helen asked.

“Because you desperately need the rest. You were probably going to travel as far as the light would allow tonight.”

“I was.”

“I figured as much, so I took matters into my own hands. I saw with my own eyes what happens to the world if you don’t close the Breach. Solas was right. We cannot afford to get you all the way back to the Temple, just to have you die halfway through the job.

“You’ll get your horses back after breakfast. Meanwhile, I’m leading the mages on a rather circuitous route back to Haven. It should give you time to get to your ship and back. Sound fair?”

“Yes,” Helen said, genuinely surprised. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Then the Spymaster turned to Dorian. “Do you prefer to travel with the Herald, or with me and the mages? We’re transporting Alexius. I didn’t know if you wanted to be there or not.”

“Definitely not,” he said. “I can’t imagine being around him right now. I’ll travel with the Herald.”

“Very well. See you back in Haven.” Then she left.

As soon as she was gone, Dorian turned to Helen. “What did she mean, ‘your ship?’”

Helen’s head was already back down on her arm, and her eyes were closed again. “It isn’t really a
ship,” she mumbled. “It’s an escape pod.”

“Oh, of course, it is! As always, that clears up everything. You know, I do believe you promised to answer my questions.”

But she was already asleep.

Dorian sighed, said goodnight to Solas and Cassandra, and returned to his room. He stripped down to his smallclothes and got into bed.

The Fade was as bad as he had feared. Red lyrium Redcliffe replayed itself with intimate details, as demons of all sorts made taunts and promises.

_This is all your fault_, Despair reminded him, over and over.

_Look at how talented you are. No ordinary mage could find a way to travel through time. You should be in charge. I could help you,_ Pride promised.

_With this sort of power, you could have any man you wanted_, Desire chimed, its muscled chest rippling in just the right way.

As the dream shifted and jangled around him, Dorian became aware of a presence that seemed to be watching along beside him. He reached out with his magic to see what it was, but the feeling vanished like smoke.

He stumbled through his dreams. For reasons he could not comprehend, the Fade kept showing him their final moments in the future Redcliffe.

At the time, Dorian’s focus had been mostly on suppressing his own panic, so that he got his spell precisely correct, lest he and Helen return to the wrong place and time. Now, he felt compelled to watch Solas, Cassandra, and Leliana sacrifice themselves as Helen sobbed in horror.

Finally, red lyrium Redcliffe faded away. Dorian felt that shadowy presence again. He turned to see what was there, but the Fade had become a peaceful beach on the Tevinter coast, where he had often gone on holiday as a boy.

He waded into the surf and allowed his mind to finally, blissfully, become quiet.

**

Helen was walking the beans before school. The morning was cool and slightly misty. She had a history test that day and was worried she hadn’t studied enough.

A noise caught her attention.

She looked up. Her grandfather’s old pickup truck rolled towards her in reverse, no driver at the wheel. It barrelled through the field, picking up speed. Helen couldn’t move or scream, or even call on her biotics.
Just as it was about to run her over, the red taillights became Solas’ eyes. “Ir abelas, fenorain,” he whispered. His head fell off his shoulders and landed at her feet.

Helen opened her mouth to scream, and bolted awake, biotics flickering around her clenched fists. Cassandra lay undisturbed in her own bed, snoring softly.

Helen waited for her heart rate to slow. After she had calmed, she lay back down and listened to Cassandra’s snores until the sun rose.

They left Redcliffe after breakfast. As soon as they were on the road, Dorian rode up next to Helen.

“I believe you owe me some answers.”

“Fair enough. What do you want to know?”

“Everything, obviously. When I asked you how old you were, you said it was ‘hard to explain.’ Let’s start there, shall we?”

“All right. Biologically, I’m thirty-one. Chronologically, I’m...let me do the math.” She screwed up her face while she did the figures in her head. “Ten-thousand, three-hundred and fifteen years old.”

Dorian glanced at Solas and Cassandra to see their reactions. When neither of them scoffed at Helen’s age, Dorian raised one eyebrow and drawled, “Ten-thousand, three-hundred and fifteen years old? You hardly look a day over twenty-five.”

“Well, I was frozen for most of it.”

“Frozen how? No, wait, I’m getting ahead of myself again. Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

Helen tried to give a brief recap of her history and how she’d arrived at the Conclave. Unfortunately, Dorian was quite adept at sussing out the things she didn’t say. He tended to follow a line of questioning to its most detailed (and often embarrassing) conclusion.

They spoke for most of the day and all through supper. By the time supper was over, Helen felt like she’d just completed one of those marathon security interviews for the Alliance counter-espionage unit.

Dorian pondered everything for a few minutes, then declared, “So, the Herald of Andraste traveled through the stars for ten thousand years, landed on a world she’d never heard of, and accidentally triggered the explosion at the Conclave, all because of her horrible taste in men.”

Solas looked up from the book he’d been reading and leveled a murderous glare at the back of Dorian’s head.

Helen could only shrug. Dorian wasn’t wrong. “I know it sounds far-fetched,” she said.

“‘Far-fetched?’ Helen, it sounds ludicrous. It’s an absolutely outrageous story that cannot possibly
be true. And yet, I believe you.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then she asked Dorian a question she’d asked everybody else on to her ground team. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of anybody leaving the planet?”

His mustache twitched. “Ah, no. Afraid not.”

“Just checking.”

The following day, Dorian once again trotted up next to her as they rode, and asked more questions.

“You said you used to do ‘undercover and infiltration’ for your military. What did that entail, exactly?”

“It depended on the mission.”

“Give me an example.”

She told him - and by extension, Solas and Cassandra - about the time she and her ground team had busted a Batarian slaver who had “specialized” in children of all races.

Helen had posed as a pregnant teen looking to sell her unborn child. Batarians didn’t usually take infants as slaves - too much work and expense - but they would sell the infant on the black market and enslave the mother.

The Batarian came to the meetup and saw only a small, pregnant human.

Helen slapped him into a stasis field and pulled a Carnifax out of her “bump.” Her team swarmed in and placed him under arrest.

The Batarian’s intel led them to a space station floating in the amorphous border between the Terminus Systems and the Attican Traverse. Helen led one of four strike teams that boarded the ship.

The conditions they’d found those children in were horrible. Helen, still angry even after all these years, gave a rather heated description of the squalor and abuse they’d uncovered.

It must have touched a nerve with Dorian, because he said, somewhat defensively, “Now, don’t go painting all slave owners with the same broad brush. Some, including my own family, treat their slaves quite well.”

Everybody went quiet.

Helen glared at Dorian. “Do you mean to tell me that you own people?”

“I don’t own much of anything anymore. But there’s nothing inherently wrong with slavery. There are abuses, certainly, but you can say that about any system.”

“Slavery is a fundamentally abusive system!”

“Some slaves are treated poorly, it’s true. But do you honestly think inescapable poverty is better?”
They argued bitterly for hours.

Dorian tried to explain to her that working for starvation was worse than slavery. An impoverished laborer was expected to feed and clothe not just himself but his entire family. However, he could sell himself into slavery and ensure that his family’s needs were met. If he were exceptionally skilled, he could become a valued member of his owner’s household.

Helen pushed back on every single inch of it. Yes, poverty was a burden, but a poor person free to change their situation might find better work or learn a new skill.

“And how many actually do that?” Dorian asked.

“Plenty! Nobody ever sold themselves into prosperity.

“Besides, the issue isn’t just about the poverty of the slave, it’s about the morals of the owner. If I kill my worker, I’m guilty of murder. But if I kill my slave, I’ve committed no crime at all!

“A just society looks at the actions of the wrongdoer. Slavery only looks at the status of the victim. That doesn’t just allow evil behavior, Dorian. It rewards it.”

A seething silence wrapped around their group. Helen stopped her horse, forcing Dorian and the others to do the same.

“I will never tolerate slavery, Dorian, or its sympathizers. If you don’t believe me, ask Cassandra and Solas what happened the first time I ran into slavers here on Thedas.”

“She killed them,” Cassandra said, bluntly. “Eight armed men. By herself.”

“Not by myself.”

“Mostly by herself,” Cassandra corrected.

“She also rescued their captives and offered them protection,” Solas said. “Those that were able and wanted to join the Inquisition were welcomed. The rest were given safe passage to their homes.”

“This is a dealbreaker for me, Dorian,” Helen said. “I appreciate everything you did in Redcliffe, but if you support slavery, you can’t be part of the Inquisition.”

Dorian’s eyes met hers. Underneath the groomed brow and the artfully applied guyliner was the gaze of an earnest and uncertain young man. Helen realized she’d been so busy answering Dorian’s questions about herself that she had never asked any of her own.

“How old are you?” she asked him.

“Biologically or chronologically?”

Helen snorted. She couldn’t help it. “Either will do.”

“I’m thirty years old.”
“You said you don’t own anything anymore. Why not?”

“I gave up my inheritance.”

“Why?”

“I had my reasons. Look, I admit that I never gave much thought to slavery. Back home, it’s just how it is. Slaves are everywhere. You don’t question it. I’m not even certain many slaves do.

“But you’ve certainly given me reason to question it now.”

There was a plea in his eyes that felt true. Helen nodded once, and they continued on their way.

None of them talked much for the rest of the day. However, that night Dorian decided he was done being quietly contrite.

“You know, Helen, when I was a boy in Minrathous, my friends and I used to take an old tin bucket, and kick it down the street. It made the most awful racket.”

Helen, who was cleaning her armor, glanced over at him, her eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

“Your voice reminds me of that noise.”

Helen threw her head back and laughed. “That’s very interesting because when I was a child, we had a little black ferret named ‘Dorian’s mustache.’”

“Ha! Was he witty and charming, your ferret?”

“He was trouble, is what he was.”

They chatted easily for the rest of the evening. Dorian liked to flirt, and Helen responded in kind. His brand of flirting was harmless and fun. It felt good to be treated like an ordinary young woman again, instead of some pseudo-religious savior.

Cassandra and Solas did not participate in their repartee, although Helen did not miss how Solas’ eyes slid back and forth between herself and Dorian. He no longer pressed food and healing on her like he had on the trip to Redcliffe.

Was he jealous? And did it matter? Part of her longed to talk to Solas privately, something they hadn’t done since before they’d approached Alexius.

But Helen doubted her ability to keep her wits about her if she did. It seemed like all she ever did around Solas was cry. The last thing Helen wanted was to gain shelter in his arms only because she was sobbing again. She wanted his friendship (and maybe more than that), but she didn’t want his pity.

Besides, his future self’s behavior had been frustratingly vague. “Fenorain” meant “darling.” It was an endearment, certainly, but the only person who had ever called Helen “darling” was her grandmother.

And that kiss on the forehead - was that caution, to prevent any transfer of red lyrium? Or was he just feeling fatherly?
At least his warning made sense. Helen pondered how to handle that revelation when the time came. If the time came. God knew she was running out of it.

Still, they made good time to Haven, arriving in the early afternoon.

Josephine met them at the bottom of the steps.

“Josie!” Helen said, happy to see her friend, but the lovely Antivan spared her only a single, worried glance before stopping right in front of Cassandra.

“What do you, Cassandra, don’t kill him.”

“Kill who?” Helen asked.

Cassandra had gone preternaturally still. “Tell me he did not bring him here,” she growled.

“Don’t kill him,” Josie repeated.

Cassandra roared and sprinted up the steps, taking them three at a time. Helen followed, hot on her heels.

Varric stood at his campfire, talking to a short, stocky man with a dark beard. As soon as he saw Cassandra, Varric said, “Oh, shit,” and stepped behind his friend.

The bearded man turned around, saw Cassandra, and flung his arms out wide.

“Seeker Pentaghast! At last!”

He gave a deep bow, which momentarily revealed a wide-eyed Varric. Then he straightened up with a cheeky grin and said, “Garrett Hawke, at your service.”

Cassandra roared again and lunged for Varric.

Helen jumped in front of the Seeker and shoved Cassandra away from Hawke and Varric. “Stop it. Cassandra, stop it!”

Cassandra didn’t seem to hear Helen, and her face was purple with fury. Helen switched into Commander mode.

“SEEKER PENTAGHAST! STAND DOWN!”

The entire village seemed to go silent. More importantly, Cassandra went still. Some of the fury drained from her face and in its place was...sadness?

Josephine ran up behind them, slightly out of breath but otherwise pristine. “Cassandra, please, come with me. Cullen is waiting in the Chantry.”

“Yes! Good idea!” Helen said, not-so-gently pushing Cassandra into Josie’s direction. “Go with Josie. I will meet you in the Chantry momentarily.”

Cassandra looked at Helen, her face resigned. “It is as I told you, Herald. Varric lies. He has lied to
us from the beginning.” Then she turned on her heel and stalked away in the direction of the Chantry.

Josie sighed. “My apologies, Helen. Messere Hawke only just arrived.” Then she followed after Cassandra, calling out the Seeker’s name.

“What she means is, I didn’t give them any time to warn you. Anyway, I’m Garrett.” He stuck his hand out.

Helen shook his hand and introduced herself, Dorian and Solas. Then she pinched her eyes shut and thought about everything she needed to do before she could leave for her escape pod.

She and Dorian needed to debrief the advisors about Redcliffe. She had to show Hawke the vid of Corypheus at the Conclave. Check on the status of the guardsmen and Cecelia.

Helen pressed her thumb into her eyeball, trying to stop the headache that throbbed behind it.

“Right then,” she said, opening her eyes and straightening her shoulders. “Varric, I’ll do what I can, but you and Cassandra really need to talk this out. Dorian, Hawke, both of you come with me, please.”

She turned to look for Solas, but he was gone.

No pity parties allowed, Trevelyan. Just get the job done.

“All right, you two. Let’s go.”

She straightened her shoulders and headed towards the Chantry.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks, as always, go to my betas, Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. Those two awesome women and their honest feedback keep "Half-Life" readable.

And we have another gorgeous render by ProcrastiKate. I've always been impressed by her renders, but this one, in particular, was created basically whole cloth from her own talented hands. Had it not been for her, I doubt we'd have any illustrations at all, since nothing I've written appears in-game.

For those of you that have never spent any time on a farm, "walking the beans" is a rather quaint term for "making the children rise at the crack of ass to pull weeds in the household garden which is the size of a car lot." (LPT: Farming parents do not Find It Amusing when their smart-aleck offspring weed JUST the beans, and ignore the corn, squash, and tomatoes. There is no letter-of-the-law exception to chores.)

I am WAY behind on responding to comments, and I apologize for that. RL continues to be extremely busy for my job and my family, but it is all a good kind of busy. I hope
to respond to all of your comments within the next few days.

Thank you to everybody who reading, commenting, or kudos! I appreciate all of you very, very much.
Chapter forty-six

Chapter Summary

Cullen greets the Herald's return to Haven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-six

Cullen trained the men with half of his attention. The other half seethed about the Herald, who was due back in Haven today.

The Inquisition had secured the Castle with no casualties. The Tevinter magister was in custody. The King of Ferelden had personally witnessed the transfer of the holding back to Arl Teagan. The mages had been secured to close the Breach.

By any rational account, it was a tremendous achievement.

It just wasn’t the whole story.

Leliana’s report from Redcliffe had terrified him. The Herald and Dorian Pavus had been sent into the future. They’d found a world swallowed by the Breach and red lyrium. Corypheus and this “Elder One” who led the Venatori were one and the same.

Despite seeing everything those mages had done, the Herald had given them their damned freedom.

And, to top it all off, the Herald had apparently offended the King, criticizing the policy of not allowing alienage elves to carry arms.

Now the Herald was hurrying back to Haven to go see her stupid ship, while Leliana was stuck keeping the mages at bay.

Cullen could scarce believe it. Did she not understand that it fell to Cullen to protect Haven from the inevitable abominations?

They had so few Templars in Haven as it was, and his duties had grown beyond his own reach. Every day, more reports awaited his signature. Every day, he fell a little further behind in his work. He’d stopped journaling. It felt like a luxury he could not afford.

Even eating felt like a chore. He ate breakfast with his men because it gave him the opportunity to check on them personally. Other than that, he’d have skipped meals entirely.

He found himself thinking again about the lyrium in his tent. You need to be at your full powers, now more than ever. It won’t even be your fault; nobody will blame you. She put you in an impossible position!

The appearance of a rider interrupted Cullen’s brooding.
His eyes automatically tracked the newcomer, a hooded figure with a mage’s staff on his back.

The mage noticed Cullen watching him, and pointed his horse in Cullen’s direction. Cullen watched as the mage drew closer and closer. Finally, just as he was about to place his hand on the pommel of his sword, the mage threw his hood back and shouted,

“Cullen Rutherford! Fancy meeting you here!”

Cullen swore so loudly that several recruits turned to stare at him.

Garrett Hawke had just chosen the worst possible time to make an appearance.

Cullen strode over to Hawke’s horse and held the reins while Hawke dismounted.

“Hawke, what in the Maker’s name are you doing here?”

“It’s good to see you, too! I’m well! Thank you so much for asking.”

Cullen ignored the sarcasm. “Do you have any idea what Seeker Pentaghast is going to do when she sees you?”

“Oh, something violent, I’m sure. Where is she, by the by? I need to have a little chat with her about how she treats my friends.”

“She’s with the Herald. They’re due back today.”

Hawke took the reins back from Cullen, and the men briefly looked each other over. Hawke’s beard needed a trim. The lines around his eyes were deeper and more numerous than the last time Cullen had seen him in Kirkwall. Hawke probably saw similar changes in Cullen.

“Hawke, why are you here?”

“Varric wrote to me and said your Herald had met an old acquaintance of ours.”

Cullen had a dozen questions he wanted to voice. Where had Hawke been? Why did he ignore the Inquisition’s call? Why hadn’t he told the Templars about Corypheus?

But none of that seemed to matter as much as much as the realization that he was genuinely grateful to see Garrett healthy and alive.

Cullen held out his hand and said, “It’s good to see you.”

“You, too.” Hawke grasped Cullen’s wrist and clapped him on the shoulder. “Nice feathers.”
Cullen asked after Hawke’s friends and family as they stabled Hawke’s horse and headed into Haven. Carver was fine, out of the Free Marches. Aveline was keeping Kirkwall in line. Merrill was still in the alienage. His uncle had a girlfriend. He hadn’t heard from Isabela or Fenris in a while.

The conversation got them all the way to Varric’s tent.
When Varric saw Hawke, he broke out into a smile that took ten years off his face. “Holy shit, you’re really here.”

“I’m really here.” Hawke walked over to Varric and gave the man a giant bear hug.

Cullen gave them a moment, then said, “Varric, I’ll let the ambassador know that Hawke is here, but the Herald and her ground team are due back any time. I can’t protect you from Cassandra.”

“Oh, do you need protection from the big, bad Seeker, you old man?” Hawke teased Varric. “That’s all right. You can just hide behind me. Like always.”

“What are you talking about? If it wasn’t for me and Bianca…”

Cullen left the men to their teasing and walked to Josie’s office. He stood in the doorway and said, “Guess who just arrived?”

“Who?”

“Garrett Hawke.”

Josephine gasped. “Cassandra’s going to kill him,” she said, referring to Varric.

“Probably. And she’ll be returning any moment. Do you want to break the news to her, or should I?”

“I should. No offense, Cullen, but she’s more likely to listen to me than you.” Josephine hurried out of her office.

“Good luck, Ambassador,” he called after her, and he heard a quiet giggle in the corner.

He turned, eyebrows raised, and saw the young apprentice that worked in Josie’s office. She was so quiet that he often never noticed her at all.

“My apologies, Miss. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

She gave him a smile. “No apology necessary, Commander. Did I hear you true? Is the Champion really here?”

“I’m afraid so. Don’t play cards with him. He’s a terrible cheat,” he said with mock sagacity. “You’re…Minerva?”

“Minaeve, Ser.” Her accent marked her as Dalish, although her face was bare. She didn’t look a day over nineteen.

“You’re the one that looks after the Tranquil, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Well, my actual job is researching creatures, magical and otherwise. But I’ve been looking after the Tranquil since the Circles fell.”

“How did you wind up here?” he asked.

He leaned against the door jam, keeping an eye on the front door of the Chantry while Minaeve told her story.

Her Dalish clan had banished her when her magic had come in at the age of seven. She’d wandered into a human village, starving and alone. When the villagers saw her using her magic to fend off
predators, they’d tried to kill her.

Templars had intervened. They’d saved her life and took her to the safety of a Circle.

She wasn’t good at magic, she explained. She’d liked having the Templars around to protect them. She had been at least a year away from her Harrowing when the Circles fell. Nobody had bothered to make sure the Tranquil were safe, so Minaeve had taken them under her wing.

As gratifying as it was to speak with a mage who had seen first hand the good that Templars could do, it also reminded him of just how angry he was at the Herald.

His conversation with Minaeve was cut short by the arrival of Cassandra and Josephine.

“Tell me she didn’t really give them their freedom,” he said to Cassandra.

“She did.”

“That’s ridiculous!” he said. “We need to renegotiate the terms, or we’re risking all of our lives!”

Josie protested that revoking the terms would make the Inquisition look incompetent or tyrannical. The three of them fell to arguing outside of Josie’s office.

Then the source of Cullen’s grief walked into the Chantry, Hawke, and Pavus right behind her.

As soon as she got close, Cullen lit into her. The Veil was torn open, or hadn’t she noticed? Had she given any thought to what that would mean when they had so few Templars to protect the people? There would be abominations everywhere! Everywhere! Now all of Haven was in danger!
He was vaguely aware of Josie, Cassandra and the Herald trying to interrupt, but the more he yelled, the angrier he became.
Finally, he shouted, “What were you thinking, turning mages loose with no oversight?”

“I was thinking, ‘Yay! Here’s another chance for the Commander to second guess a decision he didn’t have to make!’”

Her furious tone took him aback. Cullen stopped his tirade long enough to look at her.

She glared up at him, eyes narrow slits. Her hands were clenched into fists, and her right arm was bent up at the same angle she used when she was about to use her omnitool.

Then he looked around.

Every single person in the Chantry had stopped whatever they were doing to watch them. Vivienne had even stepped out of her little alcove to pose in elegant disapproval.

The Herald brought her right fist up to her face and said something into her omnitool. Then she pointed to the door that led to the dungeon. “All of you downstairs. Now.”

Garrett gave Cullen a sarcastic thumbs-up as they filed past, the Herald bringing up the rear.

As soon as they were in the office, Cullen opened his mouth to explain himself, but the Herald sliced her hand through the air.

“You’ve had your say, Commander. I’ll have mine later in private, which is far more courtesy than you deserve. For now, we have other matters to discuss.” She smacked the omnitool to life and began angrily tapping.

They all watched the recording of the Herald entering the room of Justinia’s sacrifice.

Hawke shook his head slightly when he saw Corypheus. Dorian quietly cursed in Tevene.

The Herald let the recording run until the explosion itself, then she turned off the omnitool and looked expectantly at Hawke.

“That’s Corypheus, all right, although he looks a lot less dead than when I saw him last. And it seems like Stroud was right to be worried about corruption in the Wardens.”

“Who’s Stroud?” asked the Herald.

“A friend of mine in the Grey Wardens,” Hawke said. “We were both looking into red lyrium. But in the middle of his investigation, something happened to make him believe that the Wardens were being corrupted or influenced. He didn’t give me details, but whatever he found caused him to go into hiding.”

“Do you know where he is? Do you think we could talk to him?” the Herald asked.

“Yes, although I doubt he’d come here. He’s not keen on being caught. Having seen what the Wardens are up to, I can’t say that I blame him.”


“Yes. That spell Corypheus was using? Ancient blood magic. If he’s claiming to be one of the Magisters Sidereal, he certainly knows the old tricks.”

They talked for a moment longer, the Herald asking Dorian if he wanted to stay with the
Inquisition. He did. The South was so “rustic and charming.”

Cullen rolled his eyes. Another mage! Of course! What’s one more?

“Thank you both,” she said to Hawke and Dorian. “I need to debrief my advisors now, but I’ll find you later.”

Dorian left, but Hawke walked over to Cassandra and folded his arms across his chest. Hawke was not a tall man, so he and the Seeker stood eye to eye.

“I don’t know if it’s in me to forgive you for the way you treated Varric.”

Cullen started to open his mouth to defend Cassandra but Josephine placed a hand on his elbow. She shook her head and glanced up at the ceiling.

Right. Better for Garrett to lose his temper down here where nobody would see or hear it.

“What crime did Varric commit, exactly? Hmm?”

Cassandra stood there, looking chastened.

“No answer, Seeker? Well, I’ll answer for you. Varric hadn’t committed any crimes.”

Hawke paused, then amended, “Well, not against the Chantry, anyway.

“But still, you kidnapped him. You interrogated him for days in my house. You turned my house into a jail for my best friend!

“Do you actually wonder why he kept my location a secret? Are you still asking yourself why I didn’t rush to join your precious Inquisition? The only reason I’m here at all is because Varric told me about Corypheus. And if you ever lay a finger on him again, I’ll personally snap your--”

“Champion!” the Herald interrupted Garrett. “Say your piece and lay your boundaries, but I draw the line at physical threats. We are all on the same side here.”

Hawke pointed a finger at Cassandra and growled, “Stay away from my friends.” Then he stormed out.

Cassandra stood there, her mouth open in shock.

Josie cleared her throat and said, “Well! That wasn’t as bad as I had expected.”

“No, it was worse,” Cassandra said. “He doesn’t understand! We needed him, and…”

Cassandra’s voice trailed off for a moment, before she sighed, “Well. It doesn’t matter now.”

“Are you all right, Cassandra?” asked the Herald.

Cassandra nodded, her face stoic.

“Then on to other business. What’s the status of the guardsmen?”

“Banished the day after you left,” Cullen said.

The Herald nodded. “And Cecelia?”
Josephine answered. “We gave her the choice of banishment or joining the Chantry. She joined the Chantry and is working with Mother Giselle. We are hoping Mother Giselle will have a positive influence on her. She has also agreed to make sure that her child will receive proper training if and when his magic comes in.”

Cullen let his mind drift while the Herald discussed traveling to her escape pod. She promised to return before Leliana arrived with the mages. A few other people planned to go with her.

He listened a bit more closely when Josie chided the Herald for offending the king. He had rather mixed emotions about it.

On the one hand, he didn’t mind seeing the Herald get called out for her mistakes. She didn’t know everything. It gratified him to see her admit when she was wrong.

On the other hand, Alistair was a prat.

Cullen had never much liked him during their days in Templar training. Alistair ran with the popular kids--the third-sons and noble bastards. Cullen had been poor, earnest, and quiet. He’d never been bullied, but they’d never included him, either.

Now Alistair was the King, and best friends with the only woman Cullen had ever loved.

Finally, the Herald said, “All right. So, Redcliffe. The first thing you need to know is that I was very wrong about time-travel.”

She didn’t replay the entire recording, thank the Maker, but what she did show triggered an unbearable itching in the back of Cullen’s throat.

He crossed his arms to hide the shaking in his hands, and subtly shifted his position to make sure that Cassandra was between himself and the door.

She showed them how they found Cecilia's body. He overheard her apologizing to Dorian. She showed them a couple of journal entries she’d found about Cecelia.

**Umbralis 9:41 Dragon**

Subject is a heavily pregnant human female who appears to be in her mid-twenties. She is one of the few survivors of the Elder One’s glorious victory at Haven. We spared her life when she informed us that her baby will be a new sort of mage.

“Wait, what’s that mean, ‘the Elder One’s glorious victory at Haven?’” Cullen asked.

“With me gone, Corypheus and the Venatori marched on Haven. The Inquisition was wiped out,” the Herald said.

Maker. Cullen thought for a moment. “Did it say that he’d used the mages to march on Haven?”

The Herald thought about it for a moment. “Not specifically, no. The only Circle mages we saw were Fiona and Lysas. Do you think he’ll still attack Haven? In that timeline, I was presumed dead, and he had an army of mages. In this timeline, I’m still alive and the mages work for us.”

“True, but that future also mentioned an army of demons,” Cullen pointed out.

“Which he used in Orlais,” Cassandra responded.
“And which he could use just as easily as here, with far less resistance,” Cullen argued.

The Herald asked, “What do you recommend? Is there an evacuation plan for Haven?”

Cullen shook his head. “No. If it came to that, I’d send the villagers to safety in the Chantry. We could fire the trebuchets to hinder an army’s advance, and the Inquisition troops can defend the city walls.

Josephine said, “Surely, with most of the Venatori dead, and the Herald very much alive, Corypheus would not risk an attack.”

Cullen shrugged. “Probably not. Still, I’ll put more men into making sure the trebuchets are stocked and ready.”

“We should extend the outer perimeter for an earlier warning,” Cassandra said. “I will send a raven to Leliana to get her recommendations.”

The Herald nodded and they watched the rest of the recording. Cullen turned his face when he saw Cassandra’s body being tossed on the floor, but Cassandra in real time touched his arm. “Do not look away,” she said quietly.

When the Herald turned the omnitool off, a pounding silence filled the War Room.

Cassandra broke it by saying, “That noise when the Elder One arrived. That was a dragon.”

“Maker’s breath, was it an archdemon? Is there another Blight coming?” Cullen asked.

“The King and Leliana wondered about that, too,” the Herald said. “Nobody in that future ever mentioned anything about it being a Blight.”

“I would have told you that,” Cassandra said.

“Leliana agrees,” the Herald replied. “Still, I think it’s safe to assume that Corypheus gets himself a dragon at some point. Which is a really unfair advantage, given that the Inquisition doesn’t have any air support of its own.”

Air support? Cullen frowned. Why can’t she just talk like a normal person?

The Herald said, “Any other thoughts or concerns about the mission to Redcliffe?”

Nobody said anything.

She nodded. “Cass, Josie, I need to speak with Commander Rutherford privately, if you please.”

The women exchanged looks and left.

Cullen folded his arms defensively across his chest, prepared to ignore whatever lecture she was about to give.

The Herald placed her hands around the back of her neck, closed her eyes and gave a heavy sigh. Her stomach audibly growled. She was covered in dust and dirt. Cullen realized that she had probably come to the Chantry straight from the road.

When she finally opened her eyes, she said, “I was a suspect when I first arrived here. You had people to protect. It made sense that you did not trust me.”
“But eventually, things improved. You even returned my omnitool to me. I will always be grateful to you for that, by the way, no matter what else happens.

“But now?” The Herald shook her head. “Now, you’re this.”

She turned on the omnitool.

It was him, in the Chantry, screaming at the Herald.

He was about to protest you said you’d never record without our knowledge when he heard Cassandra say, “He will not be happy you are doing this, Herald.” Then Josie said, “She told him. He’s not listening to any of us.”

His objections died on his tongue as he watched himself.

He’d towered over the Herald, his face contorted in rage. Spittle had flown from his mouth.

Behind him, in the doorway to Josie’s office, Minaeve’s pale face appeared for just a moment. Her eyes were large and round with fear before she ducked back into the safety of Josie’s office and quietly closed the door.

He’d looked like a madman and a bully. Worse, he’d done this in front of the faithful, the very people who’d looked to him for protection.

Cullen felt a deep, yawning sense of shame. When the recording was done, he couldn’t look at her.

“I really didn’t want to do that to you,” she said, her voice quiet. “But you weren’t hearing any of us, and we’re running out of time.

“You know better than anybody that the mages risk their lives coming here, yet your outburst has almost guaranteed that they’ll be treated with the fear and hatred that makes them so vulnerable in the first place.

“It’s like you deliberately sabotaged me so that, if an abomination appears, you can say, ‘I told you so.’”

Cullen felt like a child who had climbed onto the roof without thinking about how to get back down. He hadn’t put the mages in more danger, had he?

She continued, “I’m leaving for my escape pod tomorrow. When I return, I’ll close the Breach. If it kills me, it kills me. If it doesn’t, I’m leaving Haven for good. Either way, I’ll be out of your life soon enough.

“But you’ll still be here, and you need to decide what kind of a leader you want to be. Because if the man who returned my omnitool and gave me directions to the Storm Coast exists somewhere underneath all of this anger, I don’t see him.”

She gave him a crisp salute. Cullen returned it without any thought.

Then she left.

Cullen stood there, unable to move.

How long he stood there, he didn’t know. Eventually, he heard Cassandra’s heavy tread clatter down the stairs.
“What happened?” she demanded.

“She showed me myself. Maker’s breath, Cassandra,” he looked at his trembling hands. “I sounded just like Meredith.”

Cassandra frowned a little. “Come,” she said holding her hand towards the open door. “We will eat in the Mess.”

They walked across Haven. It was supper time, but the Mess was almost empty.

“Where is everybody?” Cullen wondered.

Cassandra kept her eyes firmly on her food. “At the tavern, staring at Hawke.”

“Ah.” They took the bowls the cook handed them and sat at one end of a line of tables. He picked up his spoon and blew on the stew. Once Cullen had managed to get down a few mouthfuls of food, he found himself quite ravenous. He ate two bowls in quick succession.

Cassandra said little and scowled more than she usually did.

“For what it’s worth,” Cullen said softly, “he was too hard on you.”

Cassandra shook her head. ”No, Cullen. He was not. The Herald has said something similar about her own treatment at my hands. It is fortunate that she is more accepting than Hawke.”

Cullen snorted, “That’s not the word I’d use to describe her.”

“It is not the word she would use to describe you, either.”

He put down his spoon and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“If Hawke or the Hero had recruited the mages and given them their freedom, would you have screamed at them in front of the entire Chantry?”

No. He did not admit it out loud but Cassandra’s expression made it clear she already knew the answer.

“You would have given them the benefit of the doubt. She deserves no less. We needed her to make a decision, and she made it. Like you, I wish she had done it differently. But you cannot deny that she has done everything we have asked of her.”

They were quiet for a moment longer. Cullen nursed his ale.

“You should tell her,” Cassandra said quietly.

“Er, no. I shouldn’t.”

“She deserves to know that what happened today was not really about her.”

“Exactly. It isn’t about her, so she doesn’t need to know.”

“Maker, you are stubborn,” Cassandra muttered. Then she leaned forward, her voice quiet but urgent. “We ask her to die for us. She asks for nothing in return.”

“How can you say that?” he asked. “She asked for the mages’ freedom!”
“Yes. *Their* freedom, Cullen. Just like she scolded the King over the elves. Just like she argued with Dorian about slavery. She protects others who need it. Who protects her?”

*Who needs to?* He didn’t say it out loud, because he knew Cassandra would not appreciate it, but it was true. The Herald was more than capable of protecting herself.

They finished their meal in silence. After supper, Cassandra walked with him all the way to the barracks.

“How are you following me to my tent?” he asked.

“Go inside. You will see.”

He walked in and found that the mountain of papers and reports were gone from his desk. All that remained was his journal, a few scrolls, and short, tidy stack of papers.

“Where are my reports?”

“With your assistants.”

“I don’t have assistants.”

“You do, now.”

He glared at her. “I don’t want assistants!”

Cassandra shrugged. “You have them anyway. We have been suggesting them for weeks, Cullen. After today, Josephine took matters into her own hands.”

Insecurity stabbed through him at his inadequacies to stay on top of his own job.

“I should be taking it,” he whispered.

“No. You should not.”

Cassandra stood in front of him and placed both of her hands on his shoulders. “I have faith that you will do this, Cullen, but you need not do this alone. You *should* not do this alone.

“You have friends that want to help, so let us help you. You will thank Josephine later.”

“You’re still incredibly bossy, Seeker.”

The scowl she gave him was so contrived it made him smile. “I know. Good night, Cullen.”

As soon as she was gone, he double checked under his cot to make sure that his emergency supply was still there.

It was.

He breathed a sigh of relief and changed out of his armor. Then he went through the paperwork left on his desk.

His mind flowed with productivity for the first time in weeks. Supply routes? Done. Promotions? Done. More men on the trebuchets? Done. One problem after another, all solved with a little bit of thought and a signature.
And then it was over. He’d finished it all. He stacked everything neatly into a pile.

Then, more out of curiosity than anything else, he picked up his journal and opened it to the last entry.

His stomach nearly dropped out of him.

Cullen would have sworn with his dying breath that he’d only stopped journaling in the last several days.

It had been forty-five days.

He flipped through the entries. There was nothing earth-shattering, no major personal revelations. It was just commenting on his day, including what he had eaten (three meals a day), what he’d done, and the status of various soldiers under his command.

But his handwriting had become steadier as time went on. Each journal entry was slightly longer than the one before.

He also found a few letters and notes from others that he had kept. Rylen had mailed him a list of dirty jokes that he’d marked “TOP SECRET” to guarantee it would go through Leliana’s hands. Cullen still needed to respond to Mia’s letter. He found a couple of dispatches from the Herald, including the laws of Newtonian physics. And he re-read Cass’ letter of encouragement.

As he thought it over, he realized that, after the entries had stopped, he’d begun a long, slow slide back into disarray and bad habits. Even his hands were filthy again.

Was it really that simple? Just...eating enough and accepting a bit of help? Staying organized and clean?

It couldn’t be. He remembered the days he’d journaled. He’d wanted lyrium as intensely then as he did now.

*I should be taking it. I wouldn’t be such a mess, I wouldn’t be terrifying everybody if I’d been taking it.*

Rather than give in to temptation, he blew out his lamp and lay down on his cot. A full belly made him drowsy, and he fell asleep.

He had nightmares that night, but not in the way he was used to. Usually, his nightmares were about the Circle, about the torture he’d endured.

But that night, Cullen dreamed he was the monster. He wielded the brand on Minaeve, as she protested she hadn’t taken her harrowing yet. He ignored starving children, then saw his sisters burying the bodies of his nieces and nephews. He shoved the Herald off of a cliff, only to realize that she’d been trying to close the Breach.

And as the Breach swallowed the world, Cullen reached down the side of the cliff, desperate to bring the Herald back to life, to correct his mistakes. Even though she was at the bottom of the chasm, and far out of his reach, he could see her bruised and bloodied face with perfect clarity.

She opened her eyes. “I didn’t want to do that to you, Commander” she whispered, as red lyrium began to swallow her up, “but I’m running out of time.”

Cullen bolted upright in his bed.
The early morning sunlight filtered through the canvas walls of his tent. He hadn’t overslept, but it this was the most sleep he’d gotten in weeks.

He quickly got ready and left his tent. He headed straight for the Herald’s cabin. Before he could change his mind, he gave two firm knocks on the door.

An elven serving girl answered, and bobbed a curtsey when she saw him.

He looked past her. “Apologies, miss. Is the Herald here?”

“No, Ser. She left before sunrise.”

Shit. He thanked the girl and headed towards the training grounds. Cassandra was already there, hacking a training dummy to bits.

“I thought you were going to the Herald’s ship.”

“Hawke and Varric decided to go.” She sliced off the dummy’s head.

“Oh. Well, as you're here now, can you train the men for a couple of days?” he asked her.

She stopped maiming the dummy and looked him over “Why?”

“Because you were right. I need to talk to the Herald.”

Cassandra gave a firm nod. “Very well. Talk to Charter. She knows where the Herald has gone.”

Less than an hour later, Cullen was on his horse, crossing the bridge and following the map that would take him to the Herald’s ship.

Chapter End Notes

Well, first of all, an apology. I have a ton of unanswered comments that I have not been able to get to. I promise you, I read them all, and appreciate them all. I will do my damndest to answer all of them.

Second, this chapter was another heavy-lifter by my betas. This story stays on the rails because of their guidance and patience.

Third, can I just squee a little about ProcrastiKate's render? (I'm not saying that it's right to objectify imaginary men, but, I mean, COME ON. It's Cullen and Hawke. In the SAME PICTURE.)

RL is still keeping me busier than I'd like, but there may be light at the end of the tunnel. (Or, possibly, that's just another train.)

Thank you all so incredibly much for all of your continued support of Helen and her journey. I am eternally grateful to have you here.
Chapter forty-seven

Chapter Summary

Solas broods. Helen flirts. Varric hosts a dinner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-seven

The trip to Redcliffe and back had been an endless exposition of the mighty failures of Fen’ Harel.

For weeks, Solas had watched Helen scan hundreds of people, plants, and animals. She’d explained that what she was looking at had no direct translation into Common, but that the closest interpretation was “biology.” Solas’ ears had heard her people’s term as, “De’ anai.”

When he had agreed to be scanned along with Vivienne, he had assumed, correctly, that she would find an elven mage in perfect health.

It had never occurred to him that she would also stumble across a biological explanation for his immortality, nor that she would misinterpret the results. She thought he was at risk of developing cancer.

He deflected attention away from himself with solicitude over her own well-being.

This tactic worked entirely too well. Helen quietly soaked up Solas’ attention like a kitten in a sunbeam. She ate every morsel of extra food he gave her, and never failed to thank him. When he healed her hand in the evenings, she would rest her head against his shoulder, and ask him for more language lessons.

How easily he justified his attention! It distracted her from asking too many questions about him. He had a duty to ensure the health and safety of the one person who could close the Breach. Teaching the Herald of Andraste the language and history of the elves would benefit the People.

And yet, the more of himself that he gave, the more he wanted to give.

At Redcliffe Castle, Helen carried herself with the confidence of a queen, treating Alexius with blazing disdain. Solas was so proud of her.

Then Alexius revealed that the “Elder One” was responsible for the Conclave explosion, and Solas’ reality slid out of his control.

Corypheus was still alive.

Solas was so stunned by this realization that he stood there, useless, as Alexius pulled out an amulet, and spelled Helen and Dorian into two greasy smears.

Vhenan.
For a single heartbeat, time stood still as horror cracked through his whole being. Solas inhaled, prepared to bellow out his grief and fury in Helen’s name.

Then she and Dorian popped back into existence, reeking of battle. Tear tracks streaked through dirt and soot on Helen’s face.

She immediately looked for Solas and Cassandra, panic and grief in her eyes. As soon as she saw them, her shoulders straightened, and she turned on Alexius.

Her towering confidence from moments before had been replaced with a barely-contained fury. Biotics flickered around her clenched fists. Only when Felix spoke to his father did she calm down.

Helen said little after storming out of the meeting with Leliana and the King. She fell asleep against Solas on the ferry back to Redcliffe. She fell asleep again later as he replaced the wards around the Mark, waking only long enough to listen to Leliana chide her over her rudeness to the King.

She \textit{had} been rude, but she had also been stretched far beyond her limits. Expecting Helen to navigate the highest politics in the nation whilst not receiving even the barest courtesy in return was Leliana’s mistake, not Helen’s.

Still, Solas privately agreed with much of Leliana’s assessments about King Alistair and the alienages. The situation had been centuries in the making. Alistair’s policy of incremental change and benign neglect had kept the peace, for the most part. Nobles only found it radical because they had grown accustomed to heavy-handed oppression.

But peace was not justice, and safety was not freedom. True change would only come through bloodshed. Had Solas not miscalculated so horribly at the Conclave, much of that change would already be happening.

And yet, Solas did not truly comprehend how just how catastrophic his mistakes were until he slipped into Dorian’s dreams.

The red lyrium. The Breach. \textit{An archdemon}. Death and chaos and destruction, all his own fault.

Solas struggled to stay hidden within Dorian’s dream. The Tevinter was powerful and aware, and Solas realized he had underestimated the young man’s abilities.

He learned that Helen and her advisors had known Corypheus’ identity for some time. How they knew was something Solas could not discern from Dorian’s dream.

Helen had also spoken with his future counterpart alone. He was intensely curious about what he might have told her, but as Dorian had not observed it, neither could he.

How Solas hated himself when he saw the end.

Helen watched him march off to his doom with the Seeker, and sobbed when they died, thinking they both made a noble, final sacrifice.

But “noble” only applied to Cassandra. Solas had done nothing more than mitigate a tiny fraction of the damage he had caused, hiding his true identity even at the end.

\textit{Did you fight well at the end, you coward? Or did you throw yourself into the horde, grateful for the chance to die before being recognized for what you truly are?}
Solas watched Dorian very, very closely on the trip back to Haven.

He had seen the shape of Dorian’s desire demon. The young man held no attraction to Helen or any other woman.

But naked ambition could be a powerful aphrodisiac. If Dorian wanted to make a name for himself in the south, he could hardly find a woman with more potential power than the Herald of Andraste.

Dorian was urbane, charming, and handsome. If this Tevinter peacock managed to get into Helen’s good graces, should she choose him...

*If you truly believe that only the People are real, what difference does it make whom she courts?*

Wisdom’s query felt so much heavier than it had all those months ago.

Dorian’s defense of slavery did not come as a surprise to Solas. Nor did Helen’s vehement opposition to it. Helen countered every argument Dorian raised. She conceded no ground.

She even told Dorian--a man who had unquestionably saved her life--that if he condoned slavery, he had to leave. Miraculously, the Tevinter listened. Solas could actually see the light in the young man’s eyes change as he reconsidered the entire state of the world he thought he knew.

Hearing anyone argue so passionately against slavery would have gained Solas’ approval, no matter who it was.

But hearing it from Helen made his heart soar.

Solas began to indulge in a mad daydream of himself and Helen, working as one to tear down the old world order and free every single slave. He thought again to that moment in the Castle, when she had vanished, and the word that had nearly escaped his lips.

Then she asked Dorian, “How old are you?”

“How old are you?”

And there it was. Her mortality. Her humanity. *You are too eager to forget the truth, but always, it makes itself known to you.*

As he watched her and Dorian establish a friendship, Solas realized that his fears about Helen being “taken in” by Dorian were unfounded. Dorian and Helen did not flirt because they were interested in each other. They flirted precisely because they were not interested in each other.

Helen had a loud and easy laugh that Solas almost never elicited from her. *She is young and vibrant. You have done enough harm to her already, you old fool.*

As much as it hurt to do so, Solas began to pull away.

Helen did not mention his sudden distance, but her eyes sought him out and lingered on him, questions in their depths.

Now they were back in Haven. The Champion of Kirkwall had arrived, and the town was in a tizzy. Helen would have to clean up another mess not of her own making.

Solas wanted to rage at them all for giving her more work, and for ignoring her needs.
Focus on your goals, and do nothing that does not further them. He slunk away to his cabin, planning to discreetly check in with his agents.

As it happened, all he needed to do was stand outside his cabin and listen. Haven was swimming in gossip.

Garrett Hawke had shown up alone. His appearance had surprised everybody except for Varric. Why was Hawke here? Nobody seemed to know.

Most speculation surrounding the Champion had to do with his relationship status. Solas did not care one way or the other whether Hawke was “available,” but he listened anyway, hoping to discern a reason for Hawke’s presence.

Then a new rumor bubbled underneath all of the excitement about Hawke. Commander Rutherford, furious at Helen’s decision to give the mages their freedom, had upbraided her in the middle of the crowded Chantry.

Helen responded as a military officer should—alone and behind closed doors.

Unfortunately, it also meant the villagers only heard one side of the story. They now believed the Commander’s assessment that the mages were a danger, and that Helen had unnecessarily placed Haven at risk.

“Maker, the mages are gonna kill us all.”

“You saw what happened the other night, just outside her cabin.”

“Hope she’s ready to be everywhere at once.”

“This is what happens when we allow foreigners to come here.”

Solas wanted to wring Rutherford’s thick, stupid neck, but when he glimpsed Cassandra and Cullen together, the Seeker’s scowl deeper than usual, he decided to let the Seeker handle it. For now.

As dusk approached, everyone in Haven milled about the tavern, hoping to glimpse the Champion of Kirkwall.

“Solas.”

Solas turned his head to his left. Helen’s quiet voice had come from the small retaining wall next to his quarters, although he could not see her.

“Can we go inside?” she whispered.

Solas casually walked into his cabin, keeping the door open just slightly longer than usual. The air whispered as she snuck past him. He could smell lavender soap and elfroot tooth powder.

As soon as he closed the door, she turned off her tactical cloak. “Thank you,” she breathed. “Sorry to bother you, but my hand is killing me and Josie is making me go play nice at Hawke’s party.”

He picked up her left hand and trickled a healing spell into it. “You are never a bother, but why the subterfuge?”

She closed her eyes and sighed in relief. He quickly glanced her over. Her hair was clean and neatly styled to one side. She wore a white tunic with gold embellishments, tan leggings, and
expensive boots. He’d seen this outfit before, but now it sagged on her frame.

She still had not answered her question. “Helen?” he said, gently letting go of her hand. “Why the subterfuge?” he repeated.

Helen opened her eyes and stared at his jawbone pendant for a long moment.

“I suppose you’ve heard about how the Commander voiced his displeasure over my decisions in Redcliffe?”

“Yes.”

She looked up at him with a worried expression. “I didn’t choose the mages because I’m partial to magic. I chose them because it was the best tactical decision for everybody. It solved the largest number of problems for the greatest number of people in the least amount of time, and now...”

She trailed off and looked down at her left hand.

“And now, they despise you because of it,” Solas said.

“Exactly,” she sighed. “It’s just easier when they can’t see me at all.”

“Yes. I imagine it is.”

Their eyes met with a mutual spark of understanding.

Helen gently slid her arms around his waist and embraced him. He returned it as easily as breathing.

“I lost you in Redcliffe,” she explained.

“I am right here.” But he knew what she meant.

“I know,” she pulled away, smiling softly up at him. “And I am grateful to have you in one piece.”

He wondered how he could have ever found her mouth too wide for her face.

“Are you going tonight?” she asked, changing topics.

He shook his head. A crowded tavern held little appeal to him. “I need to attend to other matters.”

Helen nodded, accepting his excuse at face value. “I wouldn’t go, either, but Josie is holding my new armor hostage if I don’t. I’m hoping Hawke sucks up all the oxygen in the room and everybody ignores me. Hopefully, nobody asks my opinion on the Chantry. That would be, um...how do you say ‘clusterfuck’ in Elvish?”

“Bel’ tellampalas.”

She grinned, “I love how you say that with no hesitation at all. You really do have quite the vocabulary, Solas. Fenedhis. Fenedhis lasa.”

Helen repeated all of Solas’ favorite battle curses. The longer her list, the wider her smirk.

His own lips curled up in response. By the time she finished, he leaned towards her, hands clasped behind his back to maintain some semblance of control.
“You know, for such a well-mannered man,” she looked rather pointedly at his lips before lazily meeting his gaze, “your mouth is filthy.”

“My words match my actions. Some activities call for more description than others.”

Helen’s eyes sparkled with interest. “I’ll keep that in mind at our next language lesson.”

She opened the door, her fingers lightly brushing his arm as she walked past him. “On nydhea, Solas. See you tomorrow.”

His eyes traced her legs and backside as she walked away.

Then he caught himself. He closed the door with a soft click and leaned his forehead against it.

Solas had just spent the last few days telling himself over and over that he needed to pull away from her, and what was the first thing he’d done the moment they were alone?

He’d encouraged her affections. He’d flirted. Now he was half-hard and had just watched Helen saunter off to spend her evening in a tavern full of other men.

Solas sat down at his table, placed his head in his hands and prepared to spend the rest of his night in miserable solitude.

**

She had gone to Solas’ cabin with two primary intentions. Get the hand fixed. Don’t cry. Even for Haven, today had been memorably shitty.

She’d never intended to actually flirt with the man.

But talking to Solas had been so easy. He understood her in a way that nobody else on Thedas did.

She’d been sincere in her gratitude when she’d embraced him. They’d had no chance to speak privately since Redcliffe. He’d been acting rather distant again. Unsure whether his words in Red Lyrium Redcliffe were more than fatherly affection, she’d kept her hug on this side of platonic.

But as she’d repeated his Elvish curses, Solas had leaned right into her personal space. He’d closely watched her lips as they shaped the naughty words of his people. His pupils dilated.

Solas was not merely amused. This man was aroused.

Feeling a bit reckless, she’d tested the waters. His comeback was smooth and full of innuendo.

Helen reminded herself that it didn’t matter much. She would probably die in a few days. Even if she survived, Solas had littered the landscape of his personality with several red flags.

None of which changed the fact that it felt good to know she could affect him like that.

That small boost of confidence ebbed as she entered the pub.

It was standing room only. She had to press herself between bodies to get in. People moved quickly out of her way once they noticed her, more out of fear than politeness.
She made her way to Varric’s table, located right in the center of the pub. Varric sat at the head. To his left sat Hawke, Harding, Sera, and finally Blackwall. Josephine sat at the other end of the table and spoke animatedly to a rather starstruck Blackwall.

To Varric’s right sat an empty chair, Dorian, then another empty chair, and finally Bull.

Bull’s enormous arm draped over the back of the empty seat between himself and Dorian. Bull moved his hands when he spoke, and every time he did, the fingers of his left hand would brush against Dorian’s right shoulder. Dorian sat poker straight, the lines of his body rigid and tense.

Vivienne stood near the far door of the tavern, speaking with a man in a mask.

“Herald!” Varric’s voice boomed out as soon as he saw her. “We’ve been saving a seat for you!”

Helen plastered a polite smile on her face as she walked over, entirely aware of all the hard gazes sent her way.

She moved to sit between Dorian and Bull, but Bull said, “Sorry, Boss. That’s Madame de Fer’s seat.”

That left the chair next to Varric.

Varric made a big show of standing up and hugging her. While she disliked the attention, she deeply appreciated his intent. He was letting everybody know, the Herald’s with me. She’s my friend.

Dorian stood up, too, and pulled the chair out for her. She sat down. Within moments, a server placed a glass of cider and a plate of roasted pheasant on buttered greens in front of her.

Varric leaned over to her and said quietly, “You eat everything that’s put in front of you, got it? No arguing.” Then he patted her hand.

Helen had to blink back tears. This was fatherly affection.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“No problem.”

As Helen tucked in, Varric raised his voice and asked, “Ruffles, did I ever tell you about the time I accidentally shot Hawke in the ass?”

“That was no accident, you liar,” Hawke retorted.

They went after each other with practiced ease, old hands at being the center of attention.

After a few minutes, people quit staring at Helen. Watching the Herald of Andraste use a knife and fork couldn’t compete with the comedy routine of Hawke and Tethras.

Helen let the conversation swirl around her. She ate all of the pheasant and buttered greens. Then she ate some shepherd’s pie. That was followed by a cold plate of roasted beets with goat cheese. She washed everything down with several bottles of cider.

“Maker, how much do you intend to eat?” Dorian said in her ear.

“As much as I can,” Helen sighed happily, as a generously-sized apple tart was placed in front of her.
Finally, Helen was full. Truly, blissfully, pants-unzipped full.

As she listened to Hawke and Varric tell lies, her friends chatted with her.

Harding was leading the expedition out to the pod. She and Helen finalized plans for the morning.

Then Dorian said, “You know, I’ve heard a rumor. Apparently, all of the best wine in town is kept in your cabin.”

“That’s probably true.”

Dorian turned in his chair so he was facing her and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Helen?”

“Yes, Dorian?”

“Friends share.”

Helen laughed. “Walk me back to my cabin tonight, and you can help yourself.”

Every time Bull spoke to Helen, he leaned across both the empty chair next to Dorian and Dorian’s lap. Dorian tried to pull away but lacked the room to do so. As a result, the tip of Bull’s horn kept “accidentally” bumping Dorian’s mouth.

“Do you mind?” said Dorian, every single time.

And every single time, Bull would respond with an, “Uh, sorry,” as in:

“Uh, sorry. So, Boss. Can I bring Krem out to the ship?” and “Uh, sorry. Hey, Boss? Do you mind if Dalish tags along, too?”

One by one, he asked permission for each and every Charger. By the end of the night, Dorian’s perfectly sculpted mustache was a complete mess.

Sera caught a buzz and started referring to Helen as, “LadyBits Herald.” After a few more drinks, Sera declared that Helen should actually name her lady bits, “Harold.” She squished her hand together and pretended it was a talking vagina. “’Ello. ’m Harold. OH, NO, IT’S A RIFT! Quick! Somebody hold my ankle!”

Bull, Blackwall, and Harding roared with laughter, while Josephine hissed at them to knock it off. Dorian shook his head in disgust. Varric sighed, “Kids these days.”

Hawke met Helen’s eye and winked. “Nothing like friends to keep you humble, eh, LadyBits?” he said.

The crowds in the pub began to thin, as people went home. Helen found herself beginning to yawn. After getting a subtle nod from Josephine that yes, it was all right for her to leave, Helen and Dorian stood up. She leaned over to hug Varric and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you so much, Varric.”

“Least I could do. Hawke and I wanna come to the ship, so I’ll see you tomorrow. You be safe, all right?”

Helen and Dorian said their goodbyes and left.
Dorian grumbled about Bull (“the bloody nerve!”) all the way back to her cabin. Once there, Helen pulled out the box of wine that was underneath her bed.

“Are you coming out to the escape pod with us tomorrow?” she asked him.

“Do you mean, am I going to trek through the ice and snow to look at a ship that doesn’t sail? Pass.”

“Fair enough.”

Helen opened her wardrobe to pull out her nightgown, and found that her new, Avvar armor had been delivered to her cabin while she’d been at the pub.

“Oooh, it’s here.” She pulled it out and laid it on the bed. Harritt had done a fabulous job. The cuirass was Initiative blue, and had white accents along the arms and legs.

Dorian looked over at her armor and harrumphed. “I can’t decide if I’m appalled that you’re going to wear something that ugly, or jealous that I don’t have anything that warm.”

Dorian picked a few bottles of wine for himself as Helen put her armor back into the wardrobe. He thanked her, saying, “Travel safe and all that. See you when you get back.”

“Good night, Dorian.”

He left, and Helen got ready for bed. When she was done, she turned off all of the lamps.

For the first time in weeks, Helen was warm and full. She gave a contented sigh and fell fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

As always, my betas dreadlordcherrycake and duinemerwen were incredibly helpful with this chapter. It was not one I had originally planned to write, but I was encouraged to check in with egghead's brain. Now that this is here, I can't imagine the story without it. Their feedback is a vital part of 'Half-Life.'

ProcrastiKate gifted us with another beautiful render. She is AMAZING. I'm very grateful that she continues to be so generous with her time and feedback. I was going
through a real rough patch when she sent me the render for this chapter, and it was literal life-fuel.

I'm so sorry that updating has slowed to a crawl. Even though I hope for more time to write over the next couple of months, I hate to make any predictions. I don't want to jinx anything. Just know that I *love* writing "Half-Life," and it gets nearly all of my spare time.

In addition to the RL scheduling issues, I also lost my hard drive a couple of weeks ago. All of 'half-life' was stored in the cloud, so I didn't lose any chapters. I did, however, lose all of my games. I had to buy a new drive, download the games, and then all the mods, etc. It was a giant pain. (Also, word to the wise. Backup your game files in the cloud.)

Thank you to everybody who reads, comments and kudos. The archive emails I get about comments and kudos have gotten me through some long days.
Chapter forty-eight

Chapter Summary

Cullen apologizes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-eight

Cullen found the Herald and her group near the entrance to an old mining tunnel.

From the looks of things, they had not been there for long. The boards from the mine’s entrance had been removed, and neatly stacked to one side. Harding appeared to be setting up camp inside the mine itself, and people were hauling tents and supplies inside.

“Commander Rutherford!” Harding saluted, curiosity in her eyes.

He saluted back. “I need to speak with the Herald. Where is she?”

Harding pointed downstream. “Just around the bend, up the mountainside. She’s repairing her ship. You can’t miss it.”

“It’s not that interesting,” Bull warned.

Krem rolled his eyes. “You thought it was wonderful until you learned you couldn’t steer it anywhere.”

“Exactly,” Bull grumbled. “Can’t believe I came all this way for a big jelly jar.”

“Well, I think it’s interesting,” Harding argued. “She’s going to let us inside tomorrow!”

As the others good-naturedly debated whether the Herald’s ship was boring or not, Cullen hobbled his own horse.

But as he began to leave, Varric called out, “Curly!”

Cullen turned around and waited for Varic, who stopped in front of him, arms crossed across his chest.

“What are you doing here?” Varric demanded.

“I need to speak with the Herald,” Cullen repeated. He tried to move forward, but Varric blocked his path.

“Don’t you think you did enough damage yesterday?”

“I’m here to apologize for that,” Cullen explained.
Hawke quipped, “So, scream at her in front of the whole Chantry but apologize in private? How very Andrastian of you.”

“Maker’s breath, Garrett! Do you really think I left my men and traveled all the way out here just to apologize in private?” Cullen shot back, beginning to lose his patience. “I do, in fact, have other things to discuss with the Herald, which are none of your business! Now, if you’ll excuse me?”

“I always loved watching you get your dander up,” Garrett mused. “Really brings out the color in your cheeks.”

Cullen glared at Hawke, who gave him a big, shit-eating grin.

“Chuckles?” Varric said. “You got something to say to the man?”

He had no idea who Varric was referring to until he heard Solas right behind him say, “Yes. I do.”

Cullen spun around. “Chuckles” glared at him with withering contempt.

“I did not personally witness yesterday’s debacle in the Chantry, but I do know that the ridicule the Herald received from the villagers afterward was so pervasive that she had to engage her tactical cloak just to make it to supper unmolested.”

Cullen had never been comfortable around Solas. Granted, that was true for most mages, but he was especially wary of an apostate who spent so much time in the Fade that he considered spirits to be his friends.

He decided that a conciliatory tone was his best bet for dealing with the hedgemage.

“I know,” Cullen sighed. “Trust me, I know. Cassandra had her say yesterday. If she were here, she would agree with everything you’ve just said.”

Solas’ expression smoothed out just a fraction. “The Seeker is wiser than most humans.”

Varric coughed skeptically at that, but he stepped out of Cullen's way. “Don’t get too close to the ship. She’s still repairing it.”

Cullen walked towards the bend. This time, nobody tried to stop him.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the Herald’s ship.

Sleek. That was the word that jumped into his head. The Herald was not in sight, but as he approached, he could hear her speaking her own language behind the ship.

He knew he shouldn’t get too close, but he couldn’t help it. Why did the glass have that texture? Were those tanks on the side? What was that thing that looked like a hitch? What sort of metal was that?

He so wanted to look inside. Cullen walked right up to the ship and touched it.

“Maker,” he said. “That’s amazing.”
The Herald went silent. A moment later, her astonished face poked out from behind the ship. Then the rest of her came into full view, wearing light blue, Avaar armor.

The Herald raised her arms to about waist level, then let them fall in exasperation at her sides.

“Step away from the pod! It’s still leaking element zero.”

He took a few steps back.

She shook her head as if he was a great idiot. “Commander, why the hell are you here?”

Cullen suddenly felt horribly awkward and unsure of what to say. “I, ah…” He started to rub the back of his neck.

“I came here to apologize. And to explain some things you should know. That you should have known a long time ago.”

The Herald gave him a hard look and glanced back over at her ship. For a moment, he was sure she was going to order him to leave. But then she sighed and said, “Follow me.”

She led him to a nearby boulder and brushed off the snow. She sat down on it, gestured at him, and said. “All right, Commander. You have my full attention.”

He rubbed his palms together for a minute while he tried to find the right way to say everything he needed to say.

“I’ve wanted to be a Templar since I was eight years old,” he began.

He told her everything. How he’d pestered the Templars in Honnleith as a child. He told her all about his training, and his initiation and the rush of power felt with his first draught of lyrium.

Then he told her about being stationed at Kinloch Hold. “You know about the Hero of Ferelden by now, I expect?”

The Herald shook her head. “Only a little.”

“She was a Circle mage and one of my charges. I had a terrible crush on her. A lot of us did. Solona was charming and pretty.

“She liked to tease me, pushing the boundaries without ever going over. A few weeks after I arrived, I had gotten a new set of armor. I was only eighteen, and still growing. She told everyone in the library that day that my new armor looked very fine, but that she missed the old set because it had been so tight.”

He still remembered the way Solona’s almond-shaped eyes had sparkled at him when she’d said it, and the thrill he’d gotten because she was paying attention to him.

“She sounds fun,” the Herald smiled.

“She was. When the Wardens recruited her, well, I won’t lie. I was heartbroken. But I couldn’t tell anybody or talk about it. You have to understand, it was forbidden.”

He told her about Uldred’s attempted to stage a coup and how demons and abominations took the tower.
“We were shockingly unprepared,” he said, unable to hide the bitterness he still felt even after all of this time. “Things spun out of control. My Knight-Commander decided to seal the tower.

“He did it to protect the people of Ferelden, but it meant that those of us still fighting in the tower were trapped inside.”

Cullen described the magical prison he had been in, and the anguish he’d felt as he’d seen mages he thought he’d known murder his friends.

“Eventually, I was the only one left. A desire demon got into my head, and posed as Solona.”

Cullen did not mention to the Herald that the desire demon had done more than just pretend to be Solona. It had touched him, made promises, offered him every fantasy he’d ever had.

“I never gave in, never once took what it offered,” he said. “I finally found the will to shout, ‘Demon, be gone!’ And just like that, I was back in the tower, still fully clothed, still in a cage.

“But demons don’t take rejection easily. Things became very painful for me after that.”

They’d buried him in a coffin, trapped him in a burning house, beaten his family in front of his very eyes. Sometimes a demon, disguised as Solona, would appear and offer salvation.

He’d never faltered. Every time he rejected the demon outright, he would find himself back on the cold, stone floor of the tower.

“Then Solona really did show up. I thought it was another trick.”

He described the horrible things he’d said to Solona, and how unkind he had been towards her.

Solona rescued him anyway. He thanked her by demanding she kill every mage still standing.

“When it was over, and Uldred had been defeated, I demanded the Rite of Annulment for all the remaining mages in the tower. All of them, even Wynne, who had just healed my injuries and had never given in to the demons. Even the children.”

He still remembered the look of revulsion and betrayal that Solona had given him. When she left, she took Wynne with her.

Gregoir had sent him to the Chantry in Greenfell to recover. “I returned to Ferelden, but it was never the same. I was never the same. I resented everybody who had not been left behind in the tower. I zealously argued for much stricter controls on the mages. Every single day, I walked right up to the line of insubordination with Gregoir without ever quite crossing over.

“Gregoir finally had a bellyful of my attitude, and sent me to Kirkwall.”

Cullen could have skipped the ugliest details of what had happened in Kirkwall. The Herald had already read Varric’s book.

But he didn’t. Talking to her felt like leeching poison from a wound.

“I was so ridiclusly grateful, at least at first. I believed in Meredith and what she was doing. I thought she had all the answers.”

What Meredith actually had was an ability to read and manipulate people. She’d encouraged Cullen’s anger and distrust. He quickly became Meredith’s second-in-command. Together, the two of them kept extremely tight control over the Gallows, at least for a while.
“Kirkwall was absolutely crawling with blood mages and abominations. There were apostates in every single part of the city. We found them on Sundermount and along the Wounded Coast.

“Sometimes they were caught and taken to the Gallows. More often, they escaped or died. The more we had to contain problems outside the Circle, the more control Meredith would exert inside the Circle.”

Two years after his arrival in Kirkwall, his sister, Mia, tracked him down and was finally able to send word. His family had fled to South Reach to escape the Blight. Their parents had not survived.

“Maker, she was so upset with me. I’d never told them I’d moved to Kirkwall, never even let them know I was still alive.

“I didn’t know how to respond. Her letter was written to the boy I’d once been, not the angry man I’d become.”

So, he did what he’d always done best. He threw himself into his work.

But something about Mia’s letter picked at him and seeped through the bitterness he’d felt since Ferelden. Slowly, by tiny degrees, he found himself uncomfortable with what Meredith ordered, and with what he allowed.

Over the years, as her madness had taken hold, Meredith began to ignore the abuses that some of her Templars inflicted upon their charges. Yet she readily kicked out other Templars for showing any modicum of leniency towards mages, or for minor infractions, like not filing paperwork.

As for the mages themselves, Meredith wielded the brand often and with enthusiasm.

“She was becoming secretive, and irrational. Every time I started to question her methods, there would be another crisis - Maker knows, there was no end of them - and Meredith would change the daily rations of lyrium.”

For years, Meredith kept him so dazzled with lyrium, and he had been so blindly devoted to her cause, that he’d ignored her behavior.

Every letter he received from Mia, Rosalie, or Bran, felt like a wake-up call to his heart. Every increased dose of lyrium made that call harder to hear.

“Then Anders blew up the Chantry.

“Maker. You can’t imagine, all of those people. The noise, the screaming, the body parts. Did you know that six months after the explosion, some Hightown noble re-tarred his roof and the workers found a pelvic bone up there?”

“No,” the Herald said gently. “I did not know that.”

Her voice startled him. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten she was there, exactly. He’d just forgotten that they were standing on the side of a mountain, and not in the soot-choked chaos of Kirkwall.

He finished his tale, explaining how he had finally seen Meredith for what she was, and how he’d stood with Hawke. “Better late than never, I suppose, but still - not soon enough.”

Cullen had been part of a group of survivors, including Hawke and Varric, who had helped Kirkwall rebuild. He’d rallied the Templars to help with the rebuilding effort, and spent the next
two years effectively running the Order in Kirkwall.

But his heart wasn’t in it anymore. Being a Templar no longer held any pride, and he’d questioned
daily whether he had been on the side of good or evil.

“Cassandra offered me a fresh start. I jumped at the chance. When we got to Haven, I made the
decision to stop using lyrium. Most Templars go mad or die, but after Kirkwall...can you see why I
wanted no part of that life?” he asked her.

“Yes, I can.”

But quitting had been so much harder than he’d ever anticipated. It had been months now, yet he
thought about it all the time, still had symptoms, still longed for it.

Cassandra had been keeping an eye on him. He’d been doing better for a while, eating regularly,
keeping a journal.

But the weight of command had crept up on him. Slowly, he’d begun to slip in his personal habits.
He had stopped eating, stopped sleeping. He even pulled his journal out to show the Herald, so she
could see the gap in his writings.

“Every day, every hour, I wonder if I should start taking it again. Everybody’s safety has to be my
top priority. That includes the mages. I have to protect them, Herald! All of them! That’s my job!

“But without lyrium, I’m just a foot soldier. So when you walked into the Chantry yesterday, I…”

He remembered how he’d looked in the recording, literally frothing at the mouth. All of the shame
and regret washed back over him.

“No, that’s not right. It wasn’t just you, and it wasn’t just yesterday. I’ve been this angry for a long
time about a lot of things that were never your fault. I have failed in my duties to you and to the
Inquisition.

“And I’m sorry, Herald. I am so sorry for all of it. I won’t lose control like that again. You have my
word.”

The afternoon was gone, and the mountainside was in full shadow. A cold breeze kicked up a bit of
dry snow and swirled it around the two of them.

Finally, the Herald sighed, “Well, that sounds like it has been bottled up for a long time.”

Cullen felt rather drained. “Yes, um...I suppose it has.”

“This is why your hands tremble?”

He nodded.

She shook her head. “When the Circles were first explained to me, I saw them as little more than
prisons for mages. Only now, having heard your story, do I wonder if the Templars are just as
enslaved.

“Does anything help take away the cravings?”

Cullen nearly told her, no, but then he remembered. “Working on the trebuchets. The schematics
and those laws of physics you sent, they take my mind off of everything for a bit.”
She smiled a little. “Newton does have a way of engaging the mind,” she said.

“Yes. Did you know him?”

The question startled a laugh out of her. “No. He died centuries before I was born. But his laws helped make space travel possible. I would not be here without him. Him and many others.

“Are there others like you?” she asked. “Templars who left and managed to escape the clutches of lyrium?”

“The King did, but he left the Templars right after his initiation. He probably wasn’t around long enough to, um--”

“Become addicted,” she finished the sentence for him. “Any others?”

“Not that I know if.”

“Would you mind if I scanned you? I could see if there are any lingering effects of lyrium in your system. You don’t have to do anything, I just--.”

“No!” he blurted out.

She held her hands up placatingly. “I won’t scan you without permission. It’s why I asked first.”

Then she placed her hands back into her lap and chewed her bottom lip for a moment before asking, “Commander, are you afraid of me?”

“Yes.”

The truth slipped out of him, too heavy to pull back.

“I see.” She looked down at her laced fingers. “I wish that--” she began. Then she stopped and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

Cullen couldn’t tell if she was tired or crying. Before he could figure out what to do, she slipped off the boulder and stood in front of him, her expression oddly intense.

“Lyrium isn’t the mineral everybody seems thinks it is. It’s a pathogen.”

He blinked in confusion down at her. “It’s a what?”

“A pathogen. I told Solas and Madame de Fer about it. They both scolded me about dangerous knowledge and told me to keep my mouth shut. But you’re being directly affected, and I trust you’ll be discreet.”

He frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t, either, honestly. I had hoped to study it, but I ran out of time. Whatever it is, I don’t think it’s meant to be ingested.”

“But if it helps,” he began, and she interrupted him.

“If you were responsible for only yourself and nobody else, would you start taking lyrium again?”

“No.”
“Then don’t take it for the Inquisition. If Cassandra had wanted a full-blown Templar, she’d have chosen one. She didn’t. She chose you.

“Someday, this war will end. If you have any chance of coming through it with your mind intact, take it. Don’t sacrifice your own soul to redeem somebody else’s mistake. Because whatever sins you’ve committed, the Breach isn’t one of them.”

Cullen experienced a sense of relief so deep it made his chest ache.

“Thank you, Herald,” he exhaled.

“You are welcome, Commander. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really do need to finish making repairs. Are you going to stay in camp tonight?”

“Yes. It’s too late to travel back.”

“Would you please let the others know not to wait up for me? I’m going to be a while.”

As she walked towards her ship, something compelled him to say, “Herald?”

She turned around to look at him. “Yes?”

“The Breach isn’t one of your sins, either.”

She ran a frustrated hand through her hair. “But it is my responsibility. That means being responsible.”

He remembered those same words from a long-ago afternoon, when the Herald had been bald and so very strange. Even back then, she’d been trying to get through to him.

Cullen did the only thing that came to mind. He saluted her.

She returned it. “See you in camp, Commander.”

“By your leave, Herald.”

She walked behind the pod and out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I know. Long time between chapters. RL is kicking the shiiiiiiit outta me right now.

Both betas were incredibly patient with me. Sometimes, this story wants to go off the rails. They keep it pointed towards its appropriate destination at all times.

And, once again, we have a glorious render by ProcrastiKate. She's so fantastic and I'm just so grateful she's here for this.
I'm still going through your comments and reviews. I've read them all. I will try to respond to all of them very soon, but if I haven't responded to yours yet, know that I've read it and appreciate you and that I have a special folder in my email inbox that I save all of them in. (for real).
Chapter forty-nine

Chapter Summary

Helen finally learns what happened to the Initiative.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter forty-nine

The trip out to the pod felt like a continuation of the party from the night before. Varric, Hawke, and all of the Chargers spent the morning trading war stories. Krem spent as much time correcting Bull’s exaggerations as Bull did telling them.

Helen felt relaxed and happy. The new armor kept her warm. A bag of sweetened, high-calorie trail mix was on her saddle.

Best of all, Haven, with its tantrum-throwing Commander, was behind her.

They arrived at a boarded up mining tunnel around noon. Scout Harding announced that the escape pod was just around the bend. They dismounted and sheltered the horses.

Stitches and Dalish stayed behind to keep watch. Everybody else followed Helen.

The pod rested near the bottom of the snowy ravine, slightly askew from its slide down the mountain, and looking much the worse for wear.

Unlike the omnitool, which held her entire personal history, the escape pod held no emotional significance for Helen. It only held answers to questions, which made it a means to an end. Still, it made her happy to see something from home, however impersonal.

“There it is,” she grinned. “Escape pod number HEEV SC-A619, Security Division, Alliance Initiative.”

There was a long pause as everyone had a look.

Finally, Varric said, “That’s, um...huh.”

“With eloquence like that, you could write a book,” said Hawke. Varric responded with a rude hand gesture.

Harding gushed, “It’s so interesting-looking!”

Sera disagreed. “Um, no, it looks like a jelly jar.”

Bull crossed his arms and pouted, “You said it was a ship.”

“No, I said it was an escape pod. It’s like a lifeboat; only you can’t steer it.”
“A rudderless lifeboat. What a useful feature,” Hawke said.

“Right? Not gonna lie, Boss. I feel a little misled.”

Helen shrugged. This was not the time to explain the cost-benefit analysis of adding directional thrusters to thousands of escape pods. “All right, everybody, I’ve got an environmental hazard to clean up. If you all would please excuse me?”

Everybody filed back towards camp, except Solas, who lingered for just a moment.

“Ar las ma vena si'l'ahn, ma' fenor falon.” *I hope you find answers, my dear friend.*

A pang thrummed through her chest. Everyone else saw the escape pod as a curiosity. Only Solas understood its true meaning to her. Had they more privacy, Helen would have pressed her lips against his cheek.

Instead, she gave his hand a quick squeeze and said, in English, “I am so grateful for you, Solas.”

His eyes lingered on hers, looking intrigued at Helen’s uncharacteristically gentle use of her native language. He returned the squeeze of her hand before heading back down the mountain.

Finally alone, Helen walked back up to the escape pod.

The omnitool detected only trace amounts of radiation outside the pod. Rain, snowmelt and time had likely cleared most of it. Unfortunately, this meant that an unknown amount of eezo had been dispersed into the wilds of Thedas.

A scan of the pod itself showed her that the interior was still too irradiated to be safe.
She used her biotics to level the pod and face it towards the sun. The spherical nose of the escape pod consisted of alternating layers of tempered alumino-silicate and fused silica. In between the layers were the hexagonal, photovoltaic cells that turned the nose into a solar battery. Helen needed the battery at full power for what she had to do.

Once the pod was properly settled back on the ground, she popped open the system’s panel on the far side of the pod and got to work.

She fired up the decontamination and recapture program to clean up the eezo. The automated process would take a few hours.

Next, she uploaded every single DNA scan from her omnitool to the pod’s onboard computer.

Then she set the data mining protocols (or DMPs) that she wanted. The DMPs would rapidly highlight anomalies, patterns, or connections that Helen lacked the time to find on her own.

As Helen stood there in the Ferelden sunshine, fully immersed in technology for the first time in months, she felt herself slipping into the hyper-focused state that her mother had called “techie Zen.” It felt wonderful, like putting on a favorite sweater.

She was in the middle of uploading language trees from the UT into the DMPs when she heard-
“Maker. That’s amazing!”

You have got to be shitting me.

She stepped out from behind the pod to see Commander Rutherford standing too close to the pod, and not quite able to meet her gaze.

He was the very last person Helen wanted to see. She was sorely tempted to send him straight back to Haven.

But army generals did not take leave of their own troops without good reason. She pushed aside her pettiness and listened to the Commander’s account.

It was an ugly history. Torture, addiction, and Meredith had scoured away any sense of normalcy he might have hoped to find in the Chantry. Now he was floundering, his duties permanently altered by the Breach, and withdrawal symptoms dogging his every waking moment.

The whole story left her feeling quietly frustrated. Had Cullen explained all of this to her several weeks ago, Helen would have made learning about lyrium a priority. She might have even considered recruiting the Templars, had she understood that his PTSD was so severe that it potentially placed others at risk.

Still, he was trying his hardest to do what he thought was right. “I have to protect them, Herald! All of them!” he told her with earnest eyes. “That’s my job.”

Helen understood that sense of duty. And when the Commander apologized, it occurred to her that he carried more responsibilities than most Admirals twice his age back in the Milky Way.

Helen still didn’t like him, but she empathized with him and she respected his sincerity. If he had the courage to break free from the Chantry, the least Helen could do was tell him what she had learned about lyrium.

The afternoon was gone by the time he left. Helen walked back to the pod and checked the external system terminal.

The decon-recapture process was complete. She could now safely enter the pod and make repairs. She cranked open the hatch and climbed inside.

The sharp scent of ozone from the decon hit her nostrils, and the emergency LEDs automatically turned on.

Her cryo unit lay on the floor, still open. Wrappers from the BioNRGs, waters, and analgesics were scattered around the pod. A small lump of eezo, gathered by the recapture protocols, rested on one of the seats.

Helen threw the garbage into her cryo unit. She also tossed in the water, the food stores, and anything else that was ten thousand years past its expiration date. After a quick scan, she chucked in the tactical packables, too. There was still enough eezo embedded in the clothing to make it unsafe.

She closed the lid and shoved the cryo unit out of the way. Then she opened the compartment on the floor that housed the 2-liter eezo core. She took it out and carefully turned it over in her hands. There was no visible external damage to the casing at all.

A scan with the omnitool revealed that the core had an internal, microscopic leak. It took only
seconds to seal. She gingerly opened the casing, placed the recaptured eezo inside, and closed it up. Then she returned it to its compartment.

Helen had done everything she could to clean up the eezo. Finally, she could get some answers. She sat down on a seat, pulled up all of the files, announcements, and emails from the Nexus that had been stored on the pod, and began to read.

Getting through everything took about two hours.

The Initiative had hoped to find the garden worlds unoccupied. If they did find intelligent life, they would make every attempt to establish diplomatic relations. They would not occupy a planet by force.

Nobody had been prepared to show up in the middle of an interstellar war.

As 100,000 Milky Way citizens slept away the centuries, a massive, dark-energy weapon had been detonated in the Heleus Cluster. According to Initiative scientists, it had caused an “instantaneous cluster-wide warping of space-time, briefly connecting multiple points in the Heleus Cluster at once.”

The locals called it, “the Scourge.” Not only had it destroyed entire star systems, but it also continued to spread even hundreds of years after its detonation. Tendrils reached throughout the Cluster and caused space-time warping on a micro scale.

Radiation from the Scourge was so intense that it converted planetary debris into element zero, something usually only seen during a supernova event. It interfered with or destroyed technology that came too close. It had rendered most of the garden worlds uninhabitable.

The Initiative, literally asleep at the wheel, had known none of this. The Hyperion had plowed right into it.

Habitat 7, humanity’s designated “golden world,” had been a disaster. The Pathfinder’s team crash landed on a planet with an unbreathable atmosphere and intense electromagnetic storms.

A member on the Pathfinder team had captured stills of the “interesting but highly destructive phenomena” caused by the storms. Phenomena like floating boulders the size of small mountains, and plasma strikes.
“Yeah,” Helen muttered. “Doesn’t that look fucking familiar.”

First contact had resulted in casualties. A hostile, space-faring species, later identified as “the kett,” had opened fire.

The Pathfinder team had found ancient, alien tech scattered all over Habitat 7. The largest complex of this tech, called a vault, seemed to be the source of the atmospheric disturbances.

Alex Ryder had used his SAM to activate the vault, and nearly killed his own daughter, Sara, in the process. He’d sacrificed his life to save hers. His final act had been to transfer his SAM to her, making Sara the human Pathfinder.
Helen had met the Ryder twins only once. Their mother, Dr. Ellen Ryder, had provisionally been in charge of the lab in Vancouver, but had been on medical leave for most of Helen’s tenure.

One afternoon, however, Dr. Ryder had stopped by the office with the twins in tow. The twins couldn’t have been any older than fourteen at the time.

Scott was suffering through a super-awkward growth spurt, like his limbs had not yet become used to their new length. But his long eyelashes had framed expressive brown eyes. Even the slightest smile revealed two dimples. He’d been somewhat bashful around adults and said little. When he did speak, his voice cracked.

Sara, on the other hand, had been all sardonic confidence. She’d worn bright purple braids, a purple Blasto t-shirt, purple boots, and purple lipstick.

Helen, thinking to tease her a little, had said, “So, Sara. What’s your favorite color?”

“Plaid.”

That smart-ass had grown into a beautiful young woman. The head-to-toe purple was gone, but hints of her younger years could still be seen in her purple highlights.
Pathfinder would have been a tough job for anybody. Sara Ryder found herself thrown into it at the ripe old age of twenty-two, newly orphaned and with her twin in a coma.

The Hyperion eventually located the Nexus, itself barely clinging to life. Most of the top government for the Initiative, including Director Garson, had been either killed or died shortly after the Nexus’ encounter with the Scourge.

The survivors had fought amongst themselves to fill the power void. The head of Nexus security, Sloane Kelly, had led a large group of followers in a failed mutiny attempt. The mutineers were exiled to Kadara, an arid and inhospitable planet.

No other Ark had yet arrived at the Nexus. 80,000 souls had gone missing.

Helen read through emails, memos, and news broadcasts, literally on the edge of her seat to find out what had happened.

She learned that the kett were not native to the Heleus Cluster, and their origins were unknown. The leader was known as the Archon. They lacked any reproductive organs. Instead, they “procreated” by conquering other species and using an extreme form of forced genetic alteration they called “exaltation.”

The only other sentient, space-faring species in the Cluster were the angara. Digitigrade mammals with blue skin, the angara had a nervous system that allowed them to generate and control an electromagnetic field that could be used both offensively and defensively.

The Scourge had devastated angaran civilization. Then the kett arrived and exploited the angarans’ decline.
And throughout the Cluster, the Initiative encountered the most glorious alien tech Helen had ever laid eyes on.
Referred to as the Remnant, or “RemTech,” it was so advanced that it rivaled or surpassed anything the Protheans had left behind. Ryder learned how to locate and activate deeply buried vaults that turned inhabitable or marginal planets into liveable, sustainable systems.

The vaults could scrub atmospheres, block radiation, and make water potable. If a planet was a desert, it would create moisture. If the planet was a frozen wasteland, it would raise the temperature. The level of power and sophistication was astounding.

Biotics had determined Helen’s career but technology had been her first love. Heleus had been filled with it. She longed to see it for herself, to study it.

*I should have been there!* Tears of resentment pooled in her eyes, and she swallowed everything down before she became overwhelmed. She was here to gather information. Grief could wait a little longer.

She kept reading.

Inch by inch, system by system, Sara Ryder had done the impossible.

With her guidance, humanity established its first outposts. Ryder had negotiated a tentative peace between the Nexus and the Exiles. She’d helped locate three of the missing Arks. She’d even opened diplomatic relations with the angara, and brought one of them onto her crew.

But war with the kett continued. The kett were determined to either wipe out or assimilate every single intelligent species they’d encountered.

Then Ryder and her ground team infiltrated Khi Tasira, a city-sized Remnant space-station that had become a kett stronghold.
Khi Tasira had been home to a mysterious race called the Jardaan. It was the Jardaan that had built not only the Remnant but entire ecosystems. Khi Tasira had housed thousands of genetic experiments and prototypes. The vaults were all interconnected through a place called Meridian. Khi Tasira had been a part of Meridian’s command center.

But the real bombshell of Khi Tasira was learning that the Jardaan had created the angara.

The stories the angara had told themselves, about their existence and their ancient history, had all been a fiction. The Jardaan had, in fact, created and seeded the angara across the Heleus Cluster.
When the Scourge had been detonated, the Jaardan had fled the system, leaving their creations to fend for themselves.

A few days after the findings at Khi Tasira had been publicly reported, Clinton had placed Helen's cryo unit in the escape pod and blasted her out into space. The next log did not appear until the night she’d landed on Thedas.

Clinton had plotted no vectors and had turned off all tracking. Helen had no way of knowing where in the cluster she actually was.

But maybe she could ask. She tapped open the comms system and said,

“Record. ‘Echo Papa India Romeo Bravo. This is Commander Helen Trevelyan, Andromeda Initiative. Star system, unknown. Location, southern hemisphere of planet known locally as Thedas. Repeat: Echo Papa India Romeo Bravo.’ ”Transmit on all Initiative frequencies along with today’s date, on my mark. Mark.”

“Acknowledged.”

This was an Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB). It would alert anybody with the ability to hear and understand that Helen wanted to be found.

There was a slight pause while the pod sent the message. Helen then expected to hear, “Message sent.”

Instead, the pod’s VI intoned, “Anomaly detected.”

“What anomaly?”

“The signal was jammed during transmission.”

“At which frequency?”

“At all frequencies.”

“Is the transponder malfunctioning?”

“Negative.”

_Huh_. “Well, then, repeat transmission.”

“Acknowledged. Anomaly detected.”

“Show me.”

The interface displayed a spectrogram. When the EPIRB was broadcast, the interference lasted exactly as long as the attempted broadcast, no more, no less.

“Repeat at other frequencies.”

“Which frequencies do you wish to try?”

“Doesn’t matter, just pick some at random.”

“Acknowledged. Anomaly detected.”
What the fuck. “Try every frequency.”

“Acknowledged. Anomaly detected.”

“What’s the source of the interference?”

Pause. “Unknown.”

“Is it that?” Helen pointed the external cameras to the Breach itself.

“Negative.”

Her mind raced for a moment. “Send the message to my omnitool on all Initiative frequencies.”


She could send a signal to her own omnitool, but not off the planet.

Helen pulled up the external video capture of landing on Thedas and watched it. It had taken place on the night side of Thedas. North of the known map, Helen could see a large ocean and another continent.

More important, however, was what she did not see.

No artificial lights. No artificial anything.

Helen sat back, deep in thought.

The Initiative had encountered highly advanced tech it on literally every potentially habitable planet they’d discovered in Heleus. Humans were so adept at creating and using technology that the Alliance had secured a spot on the Council less than thirty years after the First Contact War.

Yet here on Thedas, a Heleus planet settled for thousands of years by humans, Helen saw no sign of any advanced tech at all.

Maybe it’s on the other side of the planet. Maybe this half of the planet is having its Dark Age, and the other side is all spaceports and nanotech.

She wanted to believe that. She didn’t. But she wanted to.

Her stomach growled. She checked the time. It was late but she decided to keep going. She would likely not get this level of privacy again.

“Show results of the DMPs.”

“Acknowledged.”

The elvhen artifacts that Solas was forever seeking out had radio-carbon dates of around 4200 years ago.

The jawbone that Solas wore around his neck was from a common wolf that had died around 7500 years ago, and was descended from genetic stock the Initiative had harvested in the Alps.

Cassandra was a direct, matrilineal descendant of Cora Harper. Cassandra also had the nervous system of a mage.
It was all rather interesting but nothing especially earth-shattering appeared until she began to read the DMP on King Alistair.

Holy shit. Grand Enchanter Fiona was King Alistair’s mother.

Helen’s knowledge of King Alistair’s origin story was pretty limited, but she thought she recalled being told that he was the bastard of the former king and a serving girl.

Fiona had been a Warden, and a mage, and had been rather powerful in her own right. As far as Helen knew, the Grand Enchanter had never been a serving girl.

She wondered if Alastair knew. He certainly hadn’t acted like Fiona was his mom when Helen saw them back in Redcliffe but Helen didn’t know enough about the situation to really say anything definitive.

Alistair’s immune system made for interesting reading, as well.

**Anomalies found with this subject:**

Granulomas without necrosis detected throughout subject’s lymphatic system, spleen and liver. Tissue infected with bacterial pathogen common to ‘red lyrium’ detected within granulomas.

Elevated leukocyte count detected. 38.0 × 109 per L.

Extensive neurological abnormalities detected in subject’s cochlear nucleus, auditory cortex, prefrontal cortex. (click [here](#) for details, infra.)

Granulomas sometimes formed in the body to “wall off” infections or foreign material that did not immediately respond to white blood cells, the body’s first line of defense.

Yet despite the presence of granulomas, Alistair had the white blood cell count three times that of a normal adult. He also seemed to have some kind of enhanced hearing.

Helen had that nagging sense again of missing something really big, much like she had when she’d been talking to Leliana and Alistair.

Weren’t the Wardens semi-inoculated against the Blight? What about Fiona?

She clicked on the results of Fiona’s scan results.

No granulomas, at least not in that red future. Normal hearing. No elevated white blood cell count.

She *did* have a lot of necrotic scar tissue in her lymph system. Of course, she’d also been half-entombed in red lyrium.

Helen clicked on Solas’ and Cassandra’s Redcliffe scans. No granulomas for either of them.

Not that any of them had been in great shape. Cassandra and Fiona both had extremely high levels of telomerase. Solas’ telomerase levels, oddly enough, were depressed from his “normal” scan, but still abnormally high. And his repair protein level had been reduced to almost nothing.

Unsure what to do with the information, Helen moved on to the next DMP entry.

She clicked on the link, which the Initiative had labeled, “Unknown Organism. ???”
It was a nug.

9600 years ago on Khi Tasira, a giant space station dedicated to genetic experimentation, Sara Ryder had scanned a nug.

Helen smacked off her omnitool like she’d been burned.

She did not even try to stop the hysterical laughter that bubbled up from within her. Her giggles almost immediately turned into sobs. She turned down the emergency LEDs, buried her face into her knees, and bawled her eyes out for all she was worth.

Images flashed before her eyes as she cried - Solas’ expression in a prison cell in Redcliffe; glares of hatred from the residents of Haven; a severed foot, charred from the inside out. Helen cried out the grief she still felt about the parents she’d lost.

But mostly, Helen wept over the loss of herself, and the bitterness of knowing that the life she recognized and wanted was ancient, unremembered history.
Eventually, the waves of tears subsided.

*Stop it. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You have more answers than you did this morning.*

Helen stared at the ceiling for several minutes and thought about everything she had learned and everything she suspected.

Finally, she crawled out of the pod and headed back to camp.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to my betas Dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. This chapter was like herding cats. They both kept me on the straight and narrow for narrative focus.

I also have to give a giant shout out to XenonFae who very, very patiently baby-stepped me through the biological science of this chapter. (I mean, for real, ya'll. She did so much heavy lifting.)

There’s no render by ProcrastiKate. However, she did rip the escape pod so I could photoshop it into the first image with Helen standing next to it. If you love it, credit goes to her. If you hate it, blame goes to me.

I know I’ve been AWOL as of late. I have, like, 70 comments I still haven’t responded to, and I apologize for all of it. Real life is kicking my ass right now. But I read, save and appreciate each and every single comment, kudo and hit. I really do.

Thank you to all of you wonderful people. I appreciate you!
Chapter fifty

Chapter Summary

Helen ties up some loose ends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty

Harding had set up camp inside the mining tunnel.

The Fade felt wounded and sick, as the Breach pulled on red lyrium buried far underground. Solas could feel it reaching and growing, its diseased song faintly audible even through the very bones of the earth. As he slept, he set as many wards as he could. He tried to encourage the Veil to untwist itself, but without the orb's power, his magic was little more than a whisper against the roar of the breach.

He awoke early, more discouraged than ever.

Helen's voice, distinct but quiet, floated to his ears. Solas dressed silently, so as not to wake Varric, Hawke, and Rocky, a durgen'len member of the Chargers with a talent for explosives. He joined Helen, Harding, and Krem at the campfire.

Helen had dark circles under her eyes, but her smile at his appearance was genuine.

She looked cozy in her new fur armor. The light blue cuirass brought out the color in her eyes, and the white trim matched her hair.

Solas got a drink from the water pail and ignored the porridge.

"Don't take any of it personally," Krem was saying to Helen. "He's a manchild sometimes, but trust me--he's more impressed than he wants to let on."

"Ah, yes," Solas said, and he sat down next to Helen. "You missed last evening's debate over whether the escape pod is worthy of awe."

"There's a lot of engineering packed into that little pod," Helen protested, a bit defensively. "Most of its systems are still functional after 10,000 years. And it did its job, which was to make landfall with its occupant still alive."

Solas hid a smile behind his mug. Helen had more pride in that escape pod than she cared to admit.

"Were you able to complete your repairs?" he inquired.

"Yes," she said.
"And did you find answers to your questions?" he gently asked.

"Fewer than I wanted," Helen sighed, "but I know more than I did yesterday. I suppose I'll just have to be content with that."

Bull stumbled out of his tent, his eye patch in one hand. He ambled over to the campfire. "Did I just hear you call me a manchild?" he grumbled at Krem, as he adjusted the patch over his left eye socket.

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"I'm offended at that, Cremisius," Bull pouted. "I'm a lot of things, but I'm no 'manchild.'"

"Hmm."

"I'm not."

Krem raised an eyebrow.

"Look, Boss," Bull said, addressing his comments to Helen as he scraped a large amount of porridge into a bowl. "All I said was that, after everything we've heard about your people, your ship should be a lot more impressive."

"I've told everybody who would listen that it wasn't really a ship. But if you feel misled, then I apologize," Helen said in a very reasonable tone. "If you want to stay here while I show the others the inside of the pod, I'd completely understand."

Bull narrowed his eye at Helen and took an enormous bite of porridge. She blinked innocently back up at him.

Bull swallowed and said, "I never said I didn't want to see it."

Helen's only response was a smile.

The others woke up and ate breakfast. Soon after, most of the expedition were hiking up the mountainside to look at the pod.

Solas did not agree with Bull's assessment that it should have been "a lot more impressive." Unlike the Qunari manchild, Solas understood that this vessel had been designed with a singular purpose. And he was not so ignorant of history that he could not appreciate the thrill of seeing an artifact from another galaxy.

Still, there was no denying that it was rather ugly.

Helen opened up the hatch on the end opposite the nose and said, "Let me get my cryo unit out. Then you can all go inside."

She disappeared inside the pod. A moment later, she reappeared, biotics engaged in floating a large, metal box out of the pod. Everybody gave her room as she maneuvered it outside and let it rest on the ground.
The box had symbols on the top and sides. The top lid had a glass pane set about a quarter of the way from one end.

"Looks like a coffin," Sera said, and Rutherford visibly shuddered.

"Yeah, I guess it does," Helen admitted. "Except the whole point was to keep me alive."

"Can we go inside now?" Bull asked.

They took turns in small groups.

The whole design of the pod echoed the utilitarian efficiency of a ship's cabin. Helen explained that bubble-shaped window harnessed sunlight to power its systems. Every seat had storage underneath. The first aid kit was on the wall so nobody would have to hunt for it in an emergency.

Rectangles of dark, opaque glass were embedded in the walls above each row of seats.

"What are those for?" Bull asked.

"Viewing screens," Helen explained. "They let you see whatever the external cameras are pointed at."

She tapped on her omnitool. The screens lit up and showed the mountainside, just outside the pod. They could hear a small hum coming from the roof as the view slowly swiveled around in a full circle. (Sera, naturally, ran outside and mooned them.)

Helen spent some time answering questions and explaining how the systems worked.

Eventually, she went back outside and called out, "Anybody who wants to see the cryo unit one last time, speak now or forever hold your peace. I'm breaking it down."

Everybody gathered around, although Helen would not let them get too close. "Don't look directly at the beam," she warned. "It'll damage your eyes."

The omnitool emitted a bright beam of purple light that zoomed back and forth, starting at the bottom and working its way up. Right before their eyes, the cryo unit began to morph and dissolve.

In just a few minutes, the area where the cryo unit had been now held a dozen interlocking containers of a substance Solas did not recognize. A small marble of blue metal sat on top of one container. A sharp scent permeated the air.

"Okay," Bull said, "That was impressive."

"That is what the omnitool was designed to do," Helen said. "Making repairs or creating new parts on the fly was always its original purpose. But I need certain synthetic materials for that, and Thedas doesn't have much of a supply."

She identified the substance as "omnigel." The first thing she did was make "dental kits," which consisted of a toothbrush and spooled floss. Everybody got one. She made extras for her friends back in Haven.

Sera shook her head and said, "D'ya have any idea how much coin you'd make selling these?"
"No," Helen said.

Sera gave her a sly grin and said, "Then make me twenty more, yeah? We'll split the take."

"I sort of thought you'd prefer a couple dozen arrows."

"Wot, you serious?"

"Just bring me an arrow that you don't need back."

Sera sprinted back to camp and returned shortly with an arrow.

Helen scanned it, pulled it apart, scanned it again, and asked questions about balance and fletching. Soon, Sera had two dozen high-quality arrows.

Rutherford spoke briefly with Helen. Then he set foot for Haven with instructions to deliver the several dental kits she gave him.

They spent the rest of the day on the mountainside. People milled in and out of the pod or watched Helen use the omnitool.

She made Varric a sturdy pen with an internal, refillable ink reservoir.

The Iron Bull received a magnificent replica of the Destiny Ascension. It lit up from within when he shook it and remained illuminated for a short while.

Solas' gift was wrapped in a soft blue cloth she called "microfiber." He unwrapped it. A pang he could not acknowledge squeezed his heart.

It was a prism, clear and perfect. At one base end was a highly detailed engraving of a small moon that he had once seen hanging like a pearl in another world's sky.
"What's that on the end?" Varric asked.

"An etching of her people's moon," Solas said, keeping his voice steady.

Varric gave him a long, hard look. "And when did she show you her moon?" he asked, in a low voice.

"It is on her omnitool, Varric, as are maps and star charts from her galaxy. I am certain that if you want to see any of them, she will show them to you."

This was true. Helen did have all of those things on her omnitool.

It did not answer Varric's question, but it was true.
Varric grunted noncommittally, crossed his arms and watched Helen tinker.

She made scalpels, needles, and surgical thread for her medical corps and Stitches, the Charger's medic. She manufactured pocket knives, binoculars, and compasses for Harding and the scouts. All sorts of small, useful items emerged from her industry.

Solas was once again struck by the ease she had around her own technology, and not merely because she used it so naturally. The tension she always carried in her shoulders melted away. She smiled more. She hummed under her breath, once or twice even singing to herself a little in her own language.

Towards late afternoon, Helen announced, "Men, please return to camp. I need to speak with the women alone."

Back at camp, Varric and Hawke began to prepare supper. Within the hour, the women returned carrying small, opaque jars with them.

"Oi, Krem!" Sera hollered."She wants to talk to you!"

"Why?" Krem frowned.

"Didn't say."

Krem shrugged and left.

"What's in the little jars?" Hawke asked.

"Menstrual cups," Sera said, landing hard on the first word and drawing it out.

"Maker. I had to ask," Hawke muttered.

Krem wasn't gone for long. He returned looking bemused.

"Everything all right there, Krem?" Bull asked.

"Everything's fine, but don't call her ‘Your Worship.’ I thought she was going to punch me. Anyway, she'll be down shortly."

Helen arrived just before supper, her knapsack full. After they ate, she fished a small marble of dark blue metal out of her pocket.

"This is element zero. It was recaptured when I broke down the cryo unit. I don't suppose any of you have seen it before?" She passed it around.

Nobody had. She sighed and put in back in her pocket. Then she pulled up an image on her omnitool and projected it large enough for them all to easily see.
"What about this? Has anybody ever seen anything like this? In the Deep Roads, maybe?"

"What are we looking at?" Varric asked.

"This was called a vault," she explained. "Ancient technology, abandoned but incredibly advanced. It was capable of regulating a planet's entire ecosystem. Atmosphere, biosphere, the oceans, all of it."

"Did your people build that?"

"No. This was far more advanced than anything the Initiative had ever put together. It was built by a race called the Jaardan, but they had abandoned the cluster long before we arrived."

Then she turned hopeful eyes to Solas. "What about you? Have you ever seen this in the Fade?"

"No, da'len. I have not."

"Oh," her face fell. "Well, it was worth asking about."

"Hey, Boss, lemme ask you something," Bull said. "There's battle cry you use a lot, and I mean, a lot. I want to know what it means. It goes, 'Cheezus Crice!'"

Helen grinned. "Um, that's not a battle cry, it's blasphemy. I'm taking the name of one of Earth's more popular deities in vain."

Dalish said, "Oh! You mean like we do with the Dread Wolf!"

Solas went very still.

Helen looked at Varric. "Your friend Merrill used to say that a lot, too, didn't she?"

"She did. Still does, in fact."

Helen turned back to Dalish and said, "I'm not one for religion, I'm afraid. Who was the Dread Wolf?"

Solas bit his tongue while Dalish gushed about the absolute fiction that passed for religion and history among her people.

Every time he heard his own story mangled in the mouths of children, he struggled to keep his sanity. Hearing it from Dalish was no different. He wanted to shout, They were tyrants! Shall I tell you the truth about Dirthamen, whose ugly vallaslin mars your pretty little face?

But he said nothing. This conversation was not directed at him. And he had already learned his lesson about the Dalish elves.

After Dalish finished speaking, Helen said, "I have a question. Why do you call humans 'shemlen'? It means 'mortal,' right? But elves are mortal, too."

"But we were immortal until humans showed up," Dalish answered.

Helen shook her head, "That does not make any sense."
"It's the truth!" Dalish protested. "The elves used to be immortal. We didn't begin to grow old and
die until after we came into contact with humans! Ask any Keeper!"

"But mortality is already the genome's default," Helen argued. "Immortality is an evolutionary
dead end. A planet's resources would be stripped in no time. Not to mention, it prevents any
adaptations to environmental changes if the--"

"Look, Herald, I don't care who you are! I know my history!" Dalish snapped. Her cheeks had
turned an angry shade of pink.

"All right, Dalish, just settle down now," Bull said. "The Boss isn't an insensitive jerk on purpose,
are you, Boss?"

Helen did look somewhat embarrassed. "I apologize, Dalish. I asked you for information, and now
I'm challenging your answers. It's very rude of me."

Solas added, "If it is any consolation, she also offended the Ferelden King."

Dalish's annoyed expression morphed into scandalized delight. "You didn't!"

"Yeah, she did. An' that was after she told him she had to pee!" Sera chortled.

"Do what now? How have I not heard this story yet?" Krem asked.

The Chargers all gathered round to hear the tale and to tease Helen. She sent a mock glare in Solas'
direction, which he returned with a wicked grin.

With everybody's attention on Helen, Solas leaned back on his elbows and internally breathed a
sigh of relief. Usually, he would not tease Helen in front of the others, but her argument with
Dalish had been approaching a topic he did not wish her to examine too carefully.

After Helen had told her tale and endured some good-natured insults, Bull said, "Hey, Boss. You
know what else? You still owe us your story."

Helen blinked at him.

"Not long after you got that thing back," he said, pointing at her omnitool, "you said you'd sit us all
down and explain everything. And you never did."

"I did say that, didn't I," Helen frowned. She picked at the dirt underneath her fingernails for a long
moment. "Talking about my past may be harder for me than I anticipated."

Hawke said, "Herald, I don't know you very well. The problem you have is that nobody else does,
either. Let me show you what I mean."

Without breaking Helen's gaze, Hawke asked, "Bull, where's the Herald from?"

"Uh, the Milky Way?"

"Wrong. Solas, where's the Herald from?"
"Earth," said Solas with quiet confidence.

"Wrong. Herald, where are you from?"

"Arrowbrook, Indiana." Helen's voice was full of emotion, as if she'd surprised herself with her own answer.

"Arrowbrook, Indiana," Hawke repeated. "I meet people all the time who read a book once, and now think they know me. They tell me about that one time they went to Kirkwall, or they'll ask if I know Bann so-and-so from the Free Marches. They never seem to remember that I'm actually from Lothering.

"But the people who care about me, they know. They remember that I can never go back to Lothering because the Blight wiped it off the map.

"Do yourself a favor. Tell your story to the people important to you. You deserve to have people know who you really are."

Helen nodded, and the conversation moved to other topics. Not long after, she went to bed.

Seeing no good reason to stay up, Solas turned in, slipped across the Veil and got to work.

**

The next morning, after they packed up camp, Helen spent an hour transporting the pod from the bottom of the ravine up into the mining tunnel.

It was something she could never have done back in the Milky Way. Her biotics simply had not been strong enough.

Now, she floated it down the frozen ravine while Bull and Krem walked on either side of it to act as human directional thrusters. Harding oversaw the resealing of the tunnel.

They arrived in Haven after sundown. Solas gave her left hand a quick heal and a squeeze before he headed to his own cabin.

Helen didn't see him much after that. The next four days were a blur of meetings, preparations, and tying up loose ends.

Cassandra told her that Cullen had returned to Haven and immediately held a meeting with all his officers, guardsmen, and Templars. He'd told them that he'd been wrong to upbraid Helen and that he expected his men to protect the mages.

"He reminded them what happened the night Hester was attacked," Cassandra continued. "That you easily defended yourself against four armed men and an abomination. That you could have killed the guardsmen but had shown mercy.

"He also told them that the decision to banish the guardsmen had been his own. And that anybody caught antagonizing you or any of the mages could expect similar punishment."

"Do you think they listened?" Helen asked.

"I think some of them were inclined to dismiss Cullen's words as just politics, but your Templar
medics were there. They defended not only you but working with mages generally.

"Cullen's men respect him. They want his approval. If nothing else, they will obey him. And the people of Haven will see that."

Helen had her doubts, but it was out of her hands now.

The mages arrived and settled in.

Before Alexius and the Venatori were placed in the dungeons (thus ending any privacy the dungeon office allowed) Helen and the advisors showed Fiona the Conclave explosion.

Fiona didn't know anything about the Grey Wardens' involvement. She had not been a Warden for decades, she explained. They certainly had not stayed in touch with her. Neither did she recognize Corypheus.

Helen said nothing to Fiona about Alistair. It was none of her business. She had no idea how adoption worked on Thedas, or whether Fiona even knew Alistair's identity. But there was no reason to spook the Grand Enchanter when the Inquisition needed her most.

Helen also made personal gifts for each of her advisors.

Leliana received a two-pronged wine opener. On the handle, Helen had inscribed, "The Maker made water. People made wine."

Josephine received a pair of intricate hairpins, each with a bauble at one end. The baubles would glow for an hour or two if she shook them. She gushed over them and gave Helen a warm hug.

For Cassandra, Helen made a bicep cuff engraved with a repeating pattern of a dragon wearing a tiara on its head.

The Seeker pretended it did not amuse her. "'The Herald was hilarious.' That is what they will say about you." After another moment, she muttered, "Thank you, my friend."

Helen almost didn't make anything special for Cullen at all. They might have come to a truce, but that didn't mean she'd let go of her many resentments.

In the end, though, Helen decided that bitterness would not make her remaining days any happier. She printed up a pocket-sized booklet of Newton's "cannonball" thought experiment. Including illustrations, it was only eight pages long.

"Thank you," Cullen said, as he flipped through it. "Er, what is it?"

"Just read it, Commander," she smiled.

It was nice that Cullen no longer bristled with hostility towards her. That didn't change the fact that he was a bit of a clod.

For example, the day after the mages arrived, Helen and the advisors discussed the best time to close the Breach. On the one hand, the mages needed to rest after their long ordeal. On the other hand, every day they waited made the Breach stronger and was more opportunity for an abomination to appear.
Cullen magnanimously announced that Helen should decide when to close the Breach because, "after all, none of this would be possible without your mark."

The exhales of quiet disgust or disbelief from the women confused him. "What?" he said. "I'm just trying to be nice."

"Yes. Well done," Leliana dryly observed.

Still, Helen genuinely appreciated Cullen the following day when she tied up another loose end--Cecelia.

Cassandra brought the heavily pregnant woman into the War Room, where Helen and the other advisors awaited.

Time in the dungeons followed by time under the supervision of Mother Giselle had done little to take the edge off of Cecelia's spite.

Helen asked, "Cecelia, do you know what's about to happen here?"

"You're gonna punish me," she said sullenly.

"No. I'm going to show you what happens when I'm not here to close the Breach."

The Herald turned on her omnitool. "Remember how I used this to show you your baby?"

Cecelia nodded cautiously.

"Well, this also records things as they happen. What have you heard about my trip to Redcliffе?"

"That you was sent into the future by that Tevinter magister in the dungeon. But I ain't stupid enough to believe it."

"I didn't believe it, either, not at first. Not until I found you there."

They all watched Dorian and Helen argue about whether time travel was possible. Then, she came to the part where she scanned Cecelia.

Cecelia gasped when she saw her lifeless body.

Helen played her own realization about time travel, and why finding Cecelia had confirmed it.

Then she pulled up the journal she and Dorian had found. Helen projected the picture of the journal page nice and large, so they could all see it.

"There you go," she said.

Cecelia glared at Helen for a long moment, then spat out. "I can't read."

"Really? Oh. Well, you should learn." Helen looked at her advisors. "Would one of you do the honors, please? I don't want to be accused of making anything up."
Cullen read the journal entries out loud. Cecelia turned pale and wrapped her arms protectively around her swollen belly.

Finally, Helen showed Cecelia the courtyard at Redcliffe Castle courtyard, with its torn, green skies and floating towers. She made sure Cecelia had a good, long look.

"This is what happens if I do not close the Breach. If your boyfriend had killed me, that's what the world would become."

She turned the omnitool off.

"Hester is dead because of you. Four guardsmen were banished because of you. The only reason you are not still in the dungeons or banished yourself is because you are pregnant."

Cecelia's eyes began to water, and her lip trembled. "And my man is dead because of you! He was gonna take care of the baby and me."

"Is that what he told you?" Cullen scoffed. "Ivans was cruel and insubordinate. His last Knight-Commander begged me to take him off of hands. I did, and I've regretted it ever since."

"You weren't in the dungeons that day. I was. I saw his body myself. Ivans was in disguise, his trousers and smalls were down around his ankles. His death was his own fault."

"As for you," Cullen continued, "Ivans would have used you for a few months, and then denied any responsibility for the baby. Do you honestly think that's his first bastard?" He pointed at Cecelia's swollen belly.

Cecelia could not have looked more shocked if Cullen had slapped her.

"I know you think I'm your enemy, but I'm not," Helen said, taking advantage of Cecelia's silence. "I am doing everything I can to save us from the Breach. That includes you and the baby."

"But your best thinking in *this* timeline landed you in the dungeon. And your best thinking in *that* timeline," the Herald pointed at her wrist, "also landed you in a dungeon."

"Grow up, before you hurt your own son."

Cassandra opened the door. Cecelia waddled out, looking slightly bewildered.

Once the door was again closed, Leliana remarked, "Cullen, I don't remember hearing that Ivans had a string of bastards."

Cullen shuffled papers in his hands for a moment before saying, "I don't remember hearing that he didn't."

Josephine placed her fingertips on her chest in mock surprise. "Cullen! Did you just lie?"

Cullen shrugged and pretended to be very involved in his paperwork.

"A Templar who lies," Cassandra monotonely. "I will never get over the shock."

Cullen cleared his throat and muttered, "*Former Templar.*" He couldn't entirely hide the smile that
tugged at his mouth.

Helen realized she was witnessing what the group dynamics were like in her absence. It was good to see. She hoped they continued like this after she was gone.

The following morning, as Helen was getting ready for the day, a light knock on the door announced Telina's arrival with Helen's breakfast.

Only it wasn't Telina with Helen's meal. It was Leliana.

"Herald."

"Nightingale."

Leliana placed the breakfast tray on the table and began to set out breakfast for them both.

Breakfast was usually just porridge. Today it was an entire ham and cheese pie, berries, honey cakes, and extra coffee.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Leliana asked.

"There was an old tradition back on Earth to give prisoners an extravagant meal right before they were executed," Helen noted.

Leliana gave her a wry look. "Sounds like a waste of good food. Come on, let's eat."

Helen sat down and tucked in. She reached for a honey cake first, and could not help giving a little groan of satisfaction.

"Good?" Leliana asked.

"It's wonderful. Thank you for bringing it. I used to take sweets for granted. Hardly a day would go by when I didn't have a cookie or pastry of some kind."

Leliana pulled a few pieces of folded paper out of one of her pockets, unfolded them, and showed it to Helen. The language was one Helen had not seen before. One page included a crude sketch of the escape pod.

"This is a draft of Bull's latest report to the Qunari. He describes your biotics, the escape pod, and the omnitool in some detail."

Leliana put the papers on the table and said, "For a woman who used to do intelligence work, you have been remarkably free with information our enemies can use."

"'Our enemies?'" Helen stopped eating and stared at her Spymaster. "Leliana, the only enemy you and I have in common is Corypheus. I've been so careful with information regarding him that we've held meetings in the dungeon."

"You have also been, quite frankly, showing off your technology. You told us your ship was worthless, holding information meaningful only to yourself. I had no idea that it still functioned, or that you intended to break it down into parts!"
"I broke down the cryo unit, not the pod. And the pod doesn’t function. Without an omnitool and sunlight, it’s inoperable."

"Inoperable isn’t the same thing as useless. What do you think the Qunari or Carta would do to get their hands on that pod? Or you?"

"Have you considered simply inviting people to inspect it and sharing the knowledge? I can even print up the schematics for you if you get me enough paper."

Leliana looked at her like she’d gone off her nut. "Of course I haven’t."

"Maybe you should."

"Oh, brilliant idea, Herald! I’ll just invite the Qunari and the Carta to one of the most sacred sites in Ferelden. I’m sure Alistair won’t mind at all!

"While he’s at it, maybe the King can just snap his fingers and end centuries of discrimination against the elves. And Cecelia should just learn how to read after a lifetime of illiteracy because that’s such an easy thing to do!"

"Cecelia should learn how to read. She’s going to be the mother of Thedas’ only native-born biotic."

"Most commoners don’t read, Herald."

"I know. It’s appalling."

"Maker, you are so arrogant sometimes! Do you truly not understand that using your technology so openly makes you a target?"

“I’ve been a target from the moment I got here."

"Which does not justify you giving up Inquisition secrets!"

Helen sat up straight and narrowed her eyes at Leliana. “I’ve kept every Inquisition secret. I’ve kept the secrets of her people. I’ve run every bullshit ground mission and honored every request you’ve thrown at me. I’ve learned a great deal more than even you know."

“But the pod and the omnitool belong to me, not the Inquisition. I’ll keep all of the Inquisition’s secrets, Spymaster. I don’t have to keep my own."

Leliana seemed to lose steam. She briefly closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. "You don’t understand Thedas at all," she said, sounding tired.

"You’re right. I don’t, although it’s not for lack of trying."

"What I do understand is that Bull already knew the pod was here. I thought it more prudent to let him see up close exactly how little use it has. If the Qunari want to inspect it, let them. God knows this planet could use a bit of curiosity about science."

"But don’t put a Qunari spy on my ground team and then bitch when he spies on us for the Qunari."

They glared at each other for a moment. Helen decided that Leliana’s pique was no reason to stop eating, so she forked up a big bite of the ham and cheese pie.
Leliana sighed, "You're intelligent and skilled, Herald, but you've created problems I didn't need. If you survive, somebody will eventually come after you, or after the Inquisition, just to get to your technology."

"If it’s any consolation, the odds of my survival aren’t all that great, anyway. If I do survive, I'm leaving and taking my best tech with me." Helen indicated the omnitool on her wrist.

“Is that why you’re being so indiscreet? Because you think it just won’t matter?” Leliana inquired.

“Partially,” Helen admitted. “But mostly, I’m looking for answers that only my tech can give me.”

They finished eating their breakfast in an odd sort of quiet. It wasn't comfortable, but it was at least a truce.

When they were done, Helen helped Leliana put everything back on the tray. "Thank you for breakfast. And Leliana, just so you know. I might not agree with a lot of what you said earlier, but I appreciate you holding my feet to the fire."

Leliana inclined her head, a look of mild surprise on her face. "What you said about Cecelia is a fair point. I'll talk to Mother Giselle."

After Leliana left, Helen looked over at her bed. All of the carbs had made her rather sleepy.

*Fuck it. Take a nap. What are they going to do, fire you?*

Helen got undressed and crawled back into bed.

**

Poor Varric. He showed up at Helen’s cabin to help her put her personal history together. Helen thanked him by ruining his night.

It started out fine. Helen briefly sketched out her history on Earth and with the Alliance.

Then, without divulging the personal details she'd learned about various individuals, Helen told him what she'd learned about the fate of the Initiative and about Thedas' history.

It only took about fifteen minutes. In that time, Varric had sucked down three ales.

"Shit," he muttered. "You're sure about this? You've got proof?"

"I have evidence," Helen clarified. "I don't know if people will accept it as proof or not. But yes, I am sure."

"Nobody is gonna want to hear this, you know. *Nobody.* You walk in there and say, ‘Guess what, everyone! Elves and dwarves are humans!’ and people are gonna be pissed. Most of them won't believe you, anyway."

Helen exhaled in exasperation. "That's not how I'd planned to start."

"Well, thank the Maker for small favors. And maybe keep some of that other stuff to yourself, like how you couldn't get a signal out. Nobody will understand it, and it'll scare people. Hell, I don't
understand it, and it scares me."

"Why would a jammed signal scare you?"

"You just told me about the scary monsters that turned people into more scary monsters!" Varric exclaimed, his voice getting louder. "And what was the first thing you did when you had the chance? You tried to send a signal out there!" He jabbed a finger at the ceiling. "Where the monsters live!"

Helen suddenly felt defensive and foolish. Varric had never raised his voice at her. His anger and fear sent a deep stab of insecurity through her.

She hadn't considered what an EPIRB would look like to anybody else. For that matter, she hadn't thought that it might be picked up by an enemy. Now, it felt like a rookie mistake that she should have recognized before she'd made it.

"The kett were over nine thousand years ago! They weren't even on my mind when I sent the signal," Helen sputtered. "Now I'm stuck here, and I just…"

Wanted to know what had happened. Wanted to know if anybody was still out there. Wanted to get the hell off of this rock where everybody hates me.

Helen looked down at the Mark, blinking away tears as fast as they appeared. Don't cry. Don't bitch. Don't blame.

She bit back the complaints that bubbled up the back of her throat, but one sentence escaped her lips anyway.

"I don't belong here."

Varric cursed under his breath, before slapping a cider into her hand.

"Yes, you do. I'm not going to pretend you don't scare the shit out of me sometimes, but you belong here. Besides, where else you gonna go?"

"Now quit feeling sorry for yourself and drink up. Let's see if you can tell your story in a way that won't make people run for the hills."

Varric's gruff attitude helped Helen straighten her spine. Together, they went through the omnitool's archives.

She started by showing Varric the same vid of her parents that she'd showed to Solas. It was only the second time she'd allowed herself to look at them since she'd gotten her omnitool back. When it was over, she put her head down on the table and wept for five full minutes.

Varric patted her shoulder and opened another cider for her, even though the first one was still mostly full.

It got easier after that. It felt rather like pulling off a bandage and cleaning out a wound. The more she sought out vids and images of her life back home, the more she could look at them without turning into a blubbering mess.
Varric helped her focus on things that people would understand. "Frame your story with the familiar," he said.

They went through her life on the farm and her days in the Alliance. She wanted to gloss over Clinton, but Varric advised full disclosure. "Trust me, kiddo. If there's one thing everybody can relate to, it's a really shitty ex."

Then he helped her decide which parts of the Initiative story to tell. His advice was, "Just the basics. Enough to explain how you got here."

After a couple of hours, Varric stood up, and said, "Keep working on it. I gotta run. Hawke is probably being eaten alive by his fan club."

Once he was gone, Helen took her omnitool off her wrist. She rotated it between her fingers, lost in thought.

Humanity had a fifty-thousand-year history that pre-dated their arrival on Thedas, and her omnitool had a lot of it in its files. Music. Medicine. Technology. All of it would die with Helen unless she made arrangements for it to go to somebody else.

The omnitool was hard-coded to her DNA. Without the proper technology, none of which was here, nobody else could make changes to it. Her omnitool would never be a weapon, or take scans, or make recordings for anybody else.

But she could give somebody 'read-only' privileges, accessible upon her death. She would need to get a voiceprint and to provide a password, but it could be done.

The question was whether she should, and if so, to whom?

Her first choice had actually been Varric. He was a genuinely decent man. He also had a publisher. But his reaction tonight had given Helen pause. *Nobody is gonna want to hear this, you know.*

But if not Varric, then who?

She didn't know Blackwall. She didn't trust Cullen.

Cassandra was entirely too enamored with the Chantry. As much as Helen respected her, it felt wrong to turn the omnitool over to a military officer with a default setting of "punish first, question second."

She liked Dorian but was unsure where his loyalties lay. He'd only just begun to question that slavery might not be the natural order of things.

Bull and Leliana would start an arms race in a hot minute.

Vivienne would hoard the knowledge to help her own position. Sera would sell the omnitool before Helen's body was cold.

She wished she could, in good conscience, give it to Josephine. If anybody could bring indoor plumbing to all of Thedas, it was Josie. She treated all races and classes with equal gentility.

But the omnitool would make her a target. Leliana had been right about that, much as Helen had
not wanted to fully acknowledge it at the time. Of everyone in Helen's circle, Josie was the least capable of defending herself. Helen shuddered at the thought of sweet Josie in the hands of somebody like the Venatori.

That left Solas.

Solas was a bigot. That he equally applied his bigotry in all directions did not change the fact that he was still a bigot.

He was arrogant. He had softened up over the last few months, but Helen had heard him condescend to literally every single member of her ground team, including herself.

Still, Solas had a deep understanding of the arc of history unlike anyone else on Thedas. He saw the injustices around him with clear eyes. Helen had seen him help those less fortunate than himself countless times, regardless of race. He appeared to have no loyalties to any particular nation or organization. And he could certainly take care of himself.

If there was anybody left that would appreciate what the omnitool represented, and use it to help everybody, not just a chosen few, it was Solas.

Assuming, of course, that she could get him to understand why its information was relevant to him at all.

Red-lyrium Solas had realized the truth about Thedas’ genetic history on his own and had accepted it. Perhaps, if Helen approached him in private and showed him what she knew, she could make that happen in the here and now.

Her mind made up, Helen opened up her omnitool and got to work.

Chapter End Notes

First and foremost, my betas have, once again, come to my rescue with a chapter that was filled with potential lore traps. I was going over my last minute changes with both of them not two hours before I started pasting my draft into AO3.

And we have another gorgeous, and I do mean GORGEOUS, render from ProcrastiKate.

My schedule, unfortunately, has not become more accommodating over the last month. If anything, it's gotten worse. I am keeping my fingers crossed that things will turn around soon.

And for the record, there's no such place as "Arrowbrook, Indiana."
Chapter fifty-one

Chapter Summary

Helen tells her story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-one

The night before they closed the Breach, Helen bathed and spent a few minutes brushing and flossing her teeth.

Since getting a toothbrush and dental floss back into her life, Helen had found the process of cleaning her teeth to be nothing short of luxurious. Her gums had bled like mad the first few times she'd flossed, but already she saw improvement.

She put on clean clothes and her new pendant. The little ball of eezo that she'd recovered from her cryo unit was now secured in a small, polymer locket. It had the Initiative logo on the front and the Alliance logo on the back. It hung around her neck on the same leather thong that once held the wolf tooth token Solas had given her.

When she was finally ready, Helen grabbed her knapsack and headed to Josie’s office.

Josephine’s desk and Minaeve’s research table had been pushed together and were covered in food and drink. Plenty of chairs had been set up at the far end of the office.

Helen had invited her advisors, every member of her ground team, and Hawke.

When Solas arrived, he headed straight to her and healed her left hand without comment.

Helen had hardly seen him the last few days, but they would need to speak tonight. In careful Elvish, she said, “After this is over, I would like to talk to you. Alone.”

His penetrating gaze caught hers and held it for a long, curious moment. He tipped his head and murmured, “Ma nuvenin. You know where to find me.” Then he wandered over to the bottles of wine.

Once everybody had arrived and settled in, Leliana closed the door.

Helen stood in the space usually occupied by Minaeve’s table. “All right,” she said. “Let’s begin.”

She unclasped the locket around her neck and pulled out the little marble of element zero for all to see.
“This is element zero. Eezo, for short. It has influenced and shaped my existence since before I was born.”

She returned it to its clasp. “As most of you know by now, nodules of eezo throughout my body are what give me my biotic abilities. But element zero did far more back home than create biotics. It was the backbone of the galactic economy and government. It affected almost every major industry, from transportation to medicine.

“But for something so important to the galaxy, one place it did not naturally exist was my own home planet of Earth.”

Helen tapped on her omnitool and projected a slowly rotating model of Earth for all to see.

“This is Earth. For most of humanity’s fifty-thousand-year existence, we remained here. But about two hundred years before I was born, humanity broke free from Earth’s gravity.

“At first, we just orbited the planet. Then we made it to our moon. Eventually, we made it out to other planets.”

She projected a model of the Sol System and named off each planet, as well as Pluto.

"This model is not to scale," Helen explained. "If it were, Pluto here would be orbiting out over the lake.

“And that’s the thing about space--scale and distance take on an entirely different context than when you’re planetside. We had to find new ways to measure things like distance and speed.

“Light became a standard measurement. We used the light year, the distance light travels in a single year, as one way to measure distance. We also used light as a way to measure speed. In fact, for most of those centuries of early space travel, we believed that nothing could ever exceed the speed of light, that it was a hard barrier physically impossible to break.

"Even so, the speed of light was entirely out of our reach. Our best technology was nowhere close to being that fast. It took days to get to our own moon, months to reach the nearest planet. The closest star was four light-years away, but it would have taken our fastest ships decades to get there.

“Still, we had much in our own solar system to explore.”

She projected an image of Mars.
"This is Mars. It was too cold and the radiation too high for life to flourish. Its atmosphere was toxic to humans. But it was a decent candidate for terraforming and research. We established a laboratory there. Eventually, we had permanent settlements."
“We also established outposts around our gas giants and explored the outer edges of our solar system.

“And then, six years before I was born, something extraordinary happened on Mars. We discovered the subterranean ruins of an ancient race.

“We called these people the Protheans. It was a massive discovery. Even though the ruins were over fifty-thousand years old, the technology was exponentially more advanced than ours. The Protheans left behind starships, computers, and a lot of refined element zero.

“In the process of sorting through all of this, we discovered that Charon, one of Pluto’s moons, wasn’t a moon at all. It was a Mass Effect relay, encased in ice.”

She played a time-lapse vid of the mass relay emerging from the ice. Then she brought up with a vid of the relay being powered up for the first time.
“See that giant glowing ball there? That’s all element zero.

“We hoped it would allow us to travel across the galaxy, but we didn’t really know what would happen. Every single probe we sent through immediately dropped out of contact. For all we knew,
it would vaporize us.

“Naturally, we sent people through.”

She ran the old news vid of Jon Grissom and his crew boarding their ship and using the relay to slingshot them into the unknown.

“It worked. Grissom and his crew had been transported to the Arcturus star system. It took the light of our sun 36 years to reach Arcturus. The relay had gotten us there in a heartbeat.

“We had conquered the speed of light, and it wasn’t just the relays. Eezo allowed our ships to travel at faster-than-light speeds for shorter distances, as well.”

Helen returned to an image of Earth.

“As I mentioned, Earth has no naturally occurring eezo. But in the years following the discovery of the Prothean archives, a series of industrial ‘accidents’--and I use that term loosely--dispersed eezo into the atmosphere of several densely populated areas.”

Helen pulled up a 4-second vid loop of her father standing behind her mom, with his arms around her waist. They stood in front of the Adler Planetarium on the Chicago lakefront, their broad smiles clear as day.

Her father was still clean-shaven back then. Her mother wore a bit more makeup than she would later in life.

“George and Siobhan Trevelyan,” Helen said, managing to keep her voice mostly steady. “My mother was pregnant with me at the time, although my parents didn’t know it yet.

“Nor did they know that an accident at a nearby military base was exposing them to eezo.

"Element zero interferes with pregnancy. It often causes brain damage to the fetus or cancer. Sometimes nothing happens at all. But for a tiny percentage, the child develops biotic abilities."

She explained that her parents bought a small wind farm in Arrowbrook that tested new turbine tech and supplied electricity to the local co-op. As she talked, she showed images and brief clips from her infancy and early childhood, like a slideshow.

Baby Helen coming home from the hospital. Learning how to walk. Toddler Helen being held between her parents, who stood next to a snowman.

“As I grew up on Earth, humanity began to explore the Milky Way. We established colonies in other solar systems. Anytime we found an inactive mass relay, we did what we’d always done--powered it up and sent people through.

“Unfortunately, we were breaking galactic law. Those relays had been deliberately deactivated two thousand years earlier following a war.

“Humanity, of course, had no reason to know this. In the eight or so years we’d been exploring the galaxy, we had yet to come across another intelligent species.

“That changed when I was three years old.”

Helen pulled up images of turians, both in civilian clothing and in armor.

“These are turians. They are an intelligent, heavily militarized people who were frequently called
upon to be the galaxy’s police force.

"A detachment of turians saw a new, unknown species activating a relay in violation of the law. Instead of attempting to contact or warn us, they opened fire on what were mostly unarmed science and scouting vessels.

“A single ship managed to escape through the relay and warn us. The Alliance returned with warships and retaliated. The turians laid siege to one of our colonies. We eventually liberated the planet. Just as both sides scaled up for a full-blown war, the Council intervened and negotiated a peace.

"That is how humanity learned about an existing system of galactic government. Well over a dozen races had been traveling between the stars for millennia."

She pulled up the galaxy map and touched a part of it. "This is Thessia, the asari's home planet." An image of an asari, no more than a hand tall, appeared over that part of the map. Helen gave a quick description of the asari and their importance.

“Turians are originally from Palaven.” As the armored turian rotated in place, Helen again gave a brief description of turians and their place in the Milky Way.

“This is Sur’Kesh, the salarian's home planet.” An image of a salarian in a science uniform blinked into existence.

By the time Helen was done, fifteen miniature figures dotted the map. “And finally, we have the geth. They're a little harder to explain. Basically, the Quarians invented intelligent machines and allowed them to become self-aware. That got the Quarians in a lot of trouble. It was against galactic law to create artificial intelligence, but it still happened. At any rate, the new species called themselves geth.”

After a second or two, she ran her hand across the galaxy map. The figures disappeared, leaving only the beautiful, sparkling disc of stars.

“Maker's breath, that is marvelous,” Cullen said.

“It was,” Helen agreed wistfully. “It was an absolute wonder. For most of my life, humanity was part of a cultural exchange unlike anything we'd ever known.”

After a moment, she swiped away the Milky Way and brought up an image of herself as a little girl, feeding chickens.

“Meanwhile, back on the farm, my childhood continued. I began my schooling at age five. I was a good student, but never the top of the class. I belonged to my school’s dance team, but I was never a soloist. My life was utterly ordinary, until the day my biotics manifested.”

Helen recounted how she’d learned of her abilities, and how she’d been recruited by the Alliance.

“After I joined the Navy, my parents sold their farm on Earth and bought another one on a planet called Eden Prime.

“I did my tours of duty but had no love of combat. When an opportunity arose for me to do research at Alliance HQ back on Earth, I took it. Things went well until the Alliance hired Clinton."
Helen retold the story of Clinton. Following Varric’s advice, she did not gloss over the worst parts. She told them about the ways Clinton had cost her a promotion, invaded her privacy and stalked her life.

“Then I received word from Eden Prime. You remember I told you about the First Contact War? With the turians?”

Everyone nodded.

“One of the turians who died was a warrior with the surname of Arterius. For twenty-five years, his brother, Saren Arterius, nursed a grudge against humanity. Then one day, out of the blue, Saren and his own private army of geth attacked Eden Prime.”

Helen still had all of the security footage on her omnitool. She showed them Saren's dropship and the geth attack. Helen included a clip of the geth impaling people on dragon's teeth to turn them into husks.

She did not use the footage of her parents being husked. Watching it happen to strangers was awful enough.

The room watched in horrified silence.

“That is how my parents died. Their bodies were never recovered.”

She cleared her throat and quickly explained how she’d spent the next two years in combat and infiltration.

"On the second anniversary of the Eden Prime massacre, I traveled to the Citadel for a memorial service. When it was over, Clinton confronted me. Then this happened."

She had to admit, hearing her Thedosian friends cheer as they watched her kick the shit out of Clinton felt pretty gratifying.

“Unfortunately, beating up your ex in front of the galaxy’s diplomatic corps was a bad career move. The Alliance discharged me.”

She told them how she'd learned about the Andromeda Initiative. "The Initiative chose the Andromeda galaxy because it was the closest galaxy to ours.

“But they specifically chose the Heleus Cluster within Andromeda because our scans showed it was rich in element zero,” she said, tapping her pendant.

She used Initiative advertisements to show how massive the endeavor was. "The Andromeda galaxy was 2.5 million light-years away. And unlike the Milky Way, no relay would send us here instantaneously. Even with our best ships, we knew it would take several centuries to get here.

“The Initiative developed cryostasis to allow us to sleep as we traveled. And it wasn’t just people we put on ice. Seeds, microbes, animals--anything we would need in our biomes, we had to bring with us.”

Helen explained the breakdown of each Ark’s occupants, and how the Nexus had gone ahead of the Arks by a year, to prepare for their arrival. She showed the seed rooms and the “popsicle zoo.” Like a regular zoo, it was divided up into class. The storage facilities were brightly labeled with pictures of the living contents.
Sera asked, “Hold up, are those bees?”

“Yes.”

“Why’d you bring bees?”

“Because most crops don’t pollinate themselves. We brought wasps, hummingbirds, and butterflies for the same reason.

“Umm...where was I?”

“The Arks,” Bull reminded her.

“Right. Thank you. So, five Arks traveled through dark space for 634 years. We got here expecting to find the Nexus up and fully operational. Instead, we found ourselves stranded in the middle of a centuries’ long war and a massive ecological disaster.”

Starting with the Hyperion's encounter with the Scourge, Helen explained how Habitat 7 had been a bust, with an unbreathable atmosphere, hostile aliens, and weird electromagnetic storms.

She told them about the RemTech scattered all over the planet, and how Alec Ryder led his ground team to the vault that he believed was malfunctioning.

"This is what they found," she said. She played a short vid taken by Liam Kostra, a member of the Pathfinder ground team.
“That looks a great deal like the Breach,” Solas frowned.

“It does, but it wasn’t magic. It was a vault, and the Scourge had caused it to malfunction. It had made the entire planet unstable.”
“When Alec Ryder activated the vault, it nearly killed his daughter. He sacrificed his own life to save hers. He also transferred his SAM to her.

“SAMs are kind of hard to explain. It’s an artificial intelligence program implanted inside a person. It’s essentially like having another consciousness inside your mind. It takes in the same information as the host, and learns from the host and its environment. It can also enhance the host’s abilities, both physical and cognitive.”

“It sounds like possession,” Cullen frowned.

Helen began to argue but realized Cullen had a point.

“I guess it does. There were safety features built into SAMs designed to keep it under the control of the human host at all times, but I won’t deny the dangers. Creating artificial intelligence was illegal in the Milky Way for good reasons. Alec Ryder was dishonorably discharged from the Alliance for creating SAM. I worked in his wife’s lab in Vancouver and people still whispered about it, although it was somewhat old news by then.”

Helen told the rest of what she knew about the Initiative’s struggle for survival.

She showed them images of Khi Tasira, the giant space station dedicated to genetic experimentation by the Jardaan. She explained how the Initiative had learned that the Jaardan had created the Angara.

“And this whole time, I was still asleep. Unbeknownst to me, Clinton had snuck into the Initiative and listed us as married.”

“What a cunt,” said Hawke.

“Pretty much,” Helen agreed. She explained how Clinton had been caught and thrown her out into space.

“Something caused a leak of the pod’s eezo core. I sat in eezo for thousands of years, until the gravitational field of Thedas captured my pod.”

The descent onto Thedas began with the heat shield burning and cleared up to show the curvature of the planet. Everybody exclaimed as they recognized the coastlines of the southern hemisphere. Helen paused whenever somebody pointed out a feature they recognized. When it was done, she said, “You all know what happened after that.”

She finally switched off her omnitool. “Any questions?”

Bull went first. “What were those weapons your people used?”

"Guns. High-velocity range weapons."

Bull gave her a knowing look and asked, “Can you make one?”

“With the omnitool? No. I can make a decent knife, but not a gun.”

This was not strictly true. Helen could have made a low-quality pistol. It might have been effective at very close range, assuming it didn't blow up in her hand. But her biotics were her best weapon, and she was not comfortable with the idea of becoming the first gun dealer on Thedas.

“Did you ever learn what happened to Clinton?” Hawke said, landing on Clinton’s name with an
appreciable amount of disdain.

“No. But he’s dead now, so fuck him.”

Everybody laughed. People got up to stretch their legs and refill their drinks.

Somebody put a glass of wine in her hand. Helen spent the next hour answering questions.

Solas asked about galactic government. Helen pulled up more images of the Citadel and the Council. Blackwall’s question about whether Helen had worked with non-humans led to a short vid of her team with the Huskers.

Bull wanted to know about the people that had built the Ascension. The discussion about the asari led (as if often did when the asari were involved) to a discussion of sex and xenophilia.

When she was accused of making it up, Helen located an especially popular edition of Fornax on her omnitool.

The centerfold was a looping vid of a male turian, a female human, and an asari.

“NICE!” Bull bellowed.

Cassandra shook her head with pretend disgust but didn't leave. Cullen turned bright scarlet.

Vivienne raised an eyebrow, although whether it was in disapproval or surprise, Helen couldn’t tell.

Bull, Sera, Leliana, Dorian, and Josephine kept asking for more examples, which Helen happily displayed.

Solas came over with a glass of wine in his hand. He studied the current offering (a hanar, an asari, and an elcor) and said, "It is like watching a shipwreck. I do not want to stare but cannot look away."

“They’re diplomats, Solas,” Helen said. “Look how hard they work for peace.”

Solas gave her a droll look before he wandered off.

Helen eventually closed the Fornax. The gathering turned into a more normal party, where everybody mingled, ate and drank.

It was lovely. Helen felt as close to happy as she had in a long time.

*Maybe Varric’s right. Maybe I do belong here.*

From one corner of the room came a slightly slurred, “Oi! Ladybits!”

Helen looked around.

Sera, all belligerent attitude, pointed at Solas. “Tell this arsebiscuit that he’s wrong and I’m right!”

Solas stood ramrod straight and looked down his nose at Sera. “There is no need for you to get involved, Herald. Sera is simply once again too intoxicated for her own good.”

The room began to go quiet.
“It’s wot she said!” Sera snapped. “We’re all the same people! Din’t you, Herald!!”

Before Helen could answer, Solas said, “Compared to the other races the Herald once worked with, it is understandable that she views elves, dwarves, and humans as the same race. That does not mean, however, that we actually are the same race.”

 Fuck.

This was the conversation she’d planned to have tonight with Solas, but not in front of everybody else, and certainly not triggered by Sera’s goading.

Helen steeled herself with a quiet sigh and said, “Actually, I meant exactly that. We are all the same species.”

From the other side of the room, Varric pinched the bridge of his nose.

“See?” Sera said, triumphantly. “And it’s not just us, innit? It’s the bees, too!”

It really should not have surprised Helen that the one person on her ground-team who saw "people people," had put everything together.

Helen sighed and nodded. “Yes.”

A long deep silence fell over the room. “What’s she talking about, ‘the bees?’” Blackwall said.

“With a handful of exceptions, every plant, animal, and person on Thedas is descended, directly or indirectly, from a Milky Way species,” Helen answered.

Vivienne calmly asked, “What do you mean, my dear?”

Helen tapped on her omnitool and opened a folder she’d planned to show only to Solas.

She pulled up an image. “Does anybody know what that is?”

“A bogfisher,” Cullen said.

Helen zoomed out, which revealed the bogfisher was one of many in a swamp on its native Lorek. Several Batarians were fishing off a small pier in the background.

“This planet is called Lorek. I don’t know why the Initiative decided to harvest bogfishers to bring to Heleus, but they did.”

She opened another folder, this one with a vid. “What’s this?” she asked.

“A Druffalo herd,” said Hawke.

“We called them buffalo,” Helen zoomed out to show the Alberta countryside. A few shuttles drifted in the distance, using the old asphalt highway to guide their routes.

“And this?” She pulled up rows of corn on a farm in Indiana.

“Corn,” Cassandra said.

Helen zoomed out, to show her 10-year-old self at the end of the row, picking ears for dinner. Little Helen waved at the camera and said, “Hi, Daddy!” The subtitles appeared at the bottom of the screen.
“One of the few species I have found on Thedas that is not a descendant of the Milky Way is this one,” Helen said, as she pulled up an image from Khi Tasira.

“Sweet Maker, is that a nug?” Leliana asked.

“Yes. Pathfinder Ryder discovered them on Khi Tasira, where the Angara had also been created. The Jardaan created the nugs there, although I couldn’t begin to tell you why.”

A heavy silence filled the room.

Helen tapped on her omnitool and pulled up a small animation she’d created the night before.

“My people had learned how to manipulate our own genetic code. Mostly, we did this for reasons of health. We might improve our eyesight, or turn off a trait that led to disease. These manipulations would be passed on to our children. They leave markers that can be measured, like a clock.

“Roughly 9500 years ago, somebody manipulated the biology of one group of humans to give them superior eyesight, hearing and an enhanced nervous system, presumably so they could access a power source like the Fade.”

She showed an image of a human morphing into an elf.

“Another group of humans was altered to make them shorter, to have heavier bones, better hearing, and slightly larger brains. I don’t know exactly why, but these might be useful adaptations for a group for people who planned to live underground.”

She showed another animation of a human morphing into a dwarf.

“Are you suggesting, Herald, that elves and dwarves were created by humans?” Solas’ voice was coldly furious.

“No. I don’t know who made these changes. What I am saying is that elves and dwarves are humans.”

“That is nonsense!” Solas hissed. “Elves and dwarves were here first, long before humankind!”

“They may have been on Thedas first. But humanity appeared in this galaxy 9600 years ago. Not long after, two distinctly human races appeared on Thedas with a biome inherited almost entirely from the Milky Way, and most of it from Earth.

“I think the Veil went up around 4200 years ago. Humans—well, what Thedosians call humans—showed up a couple of centuries later. I don’t know if there’s a correlation with the Veil or if it was just coincidence.”

"And...how do you know that?" Dorian asked, his tone somewhat skeptical.

“I don’t know it for a fact. It’s just a hypothesis. Solas has found elven artifacts scattered around Ferelden that strengthen the Veil when activated. They’re all about 4200 years old.

“And a lot of the humans I’ve scanned have common ancestors dating back to around 4000 years ago. I extrapolated from there.

“At any rate, every human I’ve scanned is a direct descendant of the Initiative.”

She and Solas stared across the room at each other. His eyes were filled with outrage and shock.
“Herald?” Leliana asked, sounding annoyed, “just how long have you known this?”

“I’ve suspected it since right after I woke up. The omnitool confirmed it for me, and explained some of the timelines.”

“Remember when she asked us whether elves, dwarves, and humans could have kids?” Varric said to Cassandra.

Cassandra’s mouth opened in shock. "Herald, that was months ago! You have known for this long, and you did not tell anybody?"

“I told you the first week I was here that I believed elves, dwarves, and humans were all the same. Sera specifically asked so I told her what I knew at the time. Plus, I told Varric when he helped me put my history together.”

“I told her to keep her mouth shut,” Varric muttered.

“What about Qunari?” Bull asked. He looked at her curiously.

“I don’t know much. What I’ve seen so far points to modified elves, done here on Thedas a couple of thousand years ago. I would need to scan a lot more of you to get a clearer picture.”

Bull knit his eyebrows together. “See, that’s interesting because I don’t remember you scanning me at all.”

“I, uh, scanned the quartermaster’s office. At the Villa.”

"Oh, yeah," Bull said softly. His expression cleared up a bit. He looked Helen up and down as if seeing her for the first time.

“Darling,” Vivienne insincerely cooed, “Solas and I both asked you questions the night you scanned us. You never said one single thing about this.”

“You asked what I was looking for, and I told you. I was looking to see how mages channeled magical energy through their nervous systems. Every question you two asked me that night, I answered.”

“Were you ever planning to tell your own advisors?” Leliana accused.

“Had you asked me, yes.”

Dorian made an incredulous little noise and said, “Amicus, why would anybody think to ask, ‘Say, do you happen to know if elves, dwarves, and humans are related?’”

“Why wasn’t it obvious to you already?” Helen shot back. “All three races can have fertile offspring with each other! Any farmer would know what that means!”

“It isn’t simply the races, my dear,” Vivienne remarked. “It’s that you never mentioned this idea that we all came from your people.”

“Remind me again, Vivienne. Who was it that lectured me about keeping dangerous knowledge to myself?”

Nobody said anything. Shocked or angry faces looked back at her. Helen could almost feel the temperature in the room drop.
Something inside her broke off and landed on her tongue.

“I just showed you all how 100,000 people traveled two and a half million light-years to settle another galaxy, and nobody bats an eye. But when I point out that three nearly identical races on the planet are the same species, now you all cry foul?”

She looked at Solas. He glared back at her.

“Sera’s right, Solas. We’re the same people.”

“You are not my people!”

The clipped, cold Elvish hissed from his mouth. He'd used the plural form of "you."

Helen felt the sting of involuntary, furious tears. Her biotics flickered over her hands as she grabbed her knapsack and yanked it open. She snatched the small globe that she had made the night before and walked over to Solas.

"Maybe not," she replied in Elvish, "but you are mine. And you're not the only one who's proud."

She shoved the globe into his chest and let it go. Solas had to bobble it so it wouldn’t drop.

Then Helen opened the door and stormed out.

---

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks, as always, to my betas, dreadlordcherrycake and duinemerwen. I'm pushing around a ton of lore in chapters like this. They have been extremely patient with me about checking and double checking my work.

We also have another glorious render by ProcrastiKate. This time, we get Helen's locket, and it's just beautiful.

Finally, thank you to everybody who is continuing to follow Helen's story. I appreciate all of you very much.
Chapter fifty-two

Dorian watched Helen storm out of the office.

Poor girl. She had no idea how to make a proper exit at all.

“Ladybits s’not so happy with you now, is she?” Sera cackled at Solas. She sauntered over to the drinks table, guzzling her ale as she went.

“What’s that she gave you?” Dorian asked Solas.

It was a blue and green globe. Something clattered inside of it as Solas turned it over in his hands. A tiny slash of green light glowed on one of the continents.

“Chuckles?”

Solas flicked his gaze to meet Varric’s. His head didn't move at all, just his eyes. It was a bit unnerving.

“You gonna go after her?” Varric raised his eyebrows and indicated the door.

“No.” Solas resumed his study of the green and blue globe in his hands.

“I will talk to her,” Cassandra announced before she stomped out of the office.

“What a fun party!” Hawke quipped. “Well done, everybody. Who do we run off next?”

“Not now, Hawke,” Varric growled.

Cullen asked, “Do you think she’s telling the truth? About all of us being their descendants?”

“No,” said Solas.

“Yeah,” said Sera.

They glared at each other for a moment. Sera stuck out her tongue.

“Vivienne? What did the Herald mean, ‘keeping dangerous knowledge to herself?’” Leliana asked.

“The Herald had uncovered some unsettling information on another issue,” Vivienne explained. “I encouraged her to discuss such matters privately, preferably with people in a better position to assess how such information would be received.”
“I told her not to say anything,” Varric muttered.

“She didn’t,” Bull said, and he indicated Solas and Sera. “Not until those two dragged her into it.”

“But do you think it’s true?” Cullen asked again.

“I have never known the Herald to lie,” Josephine said.

“But we have known her to be mistaken,” Dorian reminded them. “She was wrong about time travel, after all.”

“That’s different,” Bull said. “They didn’t have magic in her world.”

“You’re saying you believe her?” Dorian scoffed.

Bull shrugged his massive shoulders. “We all had to come from somewhere.”

Solas suddenly muttered, “Fenhedis,” and strode out of the room.

“Three down!” Hawke cheered.

Josephine sighed, “I hope Solas is going to talk to her.”

“Doubt it,” Sera said. Dorian doubted it, too. Whatever Helen and Solas were to each other, that rod up the elf’s arse was getting in the way.

“Well, it has been a fascinating evening, my dears. I will see you tomorrow.” Vivienne glided out of the room, looking very above it all.

“Four! This may be a record.”

“Would you knock it off?” Varric pleaded.

“Why should I? I’m not the one who bravely defended my own skin as the Herald was attacked from all sides by her only friends. ‘I told her not to tell anybody,’” Hawke impersonated Varric.

“That’s right, Hawke, I did! It was for her own protection! She should have kept her mouth shut.”

Leliana agreed, “Yes. She should have. I’ve explained to her that she doesn’t really understand Thedas. People are afraid of her already, without thinking she’s a heretic on top of everything else.” She took a thoughtful sip of wine and added, “Although I must admit that if I’d known she carried that kind of erotica on her omnitool, I might not have ever given it back.”

Blackwall chuckled, “Erotica? Is that what fancy Orlesians call pornography?”

Everyone began to talk about the sexual proclivities of the Herald’s people. It was a much nicer topic than religion or history or whatever it was that had just happened with Helen.

“So, Vint. Tell me. What did you think of the Herald’s porn?”

Bull’s voice, soft and low, startled Dorian. He hadn’t even heard the Qunari move behind him.

Dorian turned to face Bull. He was eye level with the Qunari’s chest and had to tilt his head up to meet his gaze.

“If you must know, I thought it made the most notorious pleasure palaces of Minrathous seem
downright chaste. I don’t know how the Herald’s people managed it with all those different body parts.”

“Some people like the challenge of something a little different.”

“A little different’ is one thing. Claws and razor-sharp teeth are something else entirely, especially when they’re approaching the vicinity of my cock.”

Bull held his gaze as he drank a bottle of ale. Dorian was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable when Josephine said, “All right, everyone, it is late. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Blackwall said, “Right, Flissa’s it is. You comin’, Sera?”

“Dunno. You buyin’?”

“Maker, girl, do you ever spend your own coin?”

“Er...no?”

Bull rolled his eyes and said over his shoulder, “I’ll cover you, Sera. Again.” Then he turned to Dorian. “What do you say, Vint? Head to the pub?”

There was a slight emphasis on the word “head.” Dorian suddenly recalled that the last time he’d been in the pub with Bull, the man had spent the entire evening “accidentally” ruining Dorian’s mustache.

“No, thank you,” Dorian said, rather stiffly.

“Suit yourself. See you tomorrow.” Bull followed Blackwall, Varric, Hawke, and Sera out the door.

Dorian looked around the office. Josephine was directing three maids with clean-up. Everyone else was gone.

He suddenly felt out of place and a bit lonely. He grabbed an unopened bottle of wine as if he had every right to it and left.

***

Helen did not disengage her tactical cloak until she got into her cabin. Once there, she pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and ordered herself to not cry.

A sharp knock interrupted her thoughts.

It was Cassandra, looking stern as ever. She came into Helen’s cabin and said, “Are you all right, Herald?”

“No.”

Cassandra shook her head. “I apologize for how the party ended. I should have come to your defense.”

“You believe me, then?” Helen felt a spark of hope.

“I don’t know what to believe,” Cassandra sighed. “What you described is contrary to everything I have ever been taught.”
“I see. And what were you taught?”

“That the Maker created the Veil before he created men. And that there was no time in human history when the Veil did not exist.”

“I’m six thousand years older than the Veil, so humans existed long before the Veil did.”

Cassandra frowned. “Doesn’t it seem more likely that we were already here when your people arrived?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Cassandra challenged.

Helen lacked the energy to explain DNA and evolution, so she decided to use a shortcut—Cassandra’s personal history.

“Because I worked with one of your ancestors.”

Cassandra stared at her.

“I scanned you in that red future, remember?”

Helen sat down at the table and tapped on her omnitool. “You’re a matrilineal descendant of Cora Harper. She was second-in-command to Alec Ryder and a member of the Pathfinder team.

“Here. This is her.” Helen pulled up an image of the woman who had trained her prior to leaving the Milky Way.

Cassandra sat down to better see.
“She looks like a warrior.” Cassandra had a slightly awed expression on her face.

“She was.”

“You knew her?”

“Yes. She trained most of the biotics who joined the Initiative.”

“What was she like?”

“And on my father’s side?”

“I don’t know. I would need to scan a close male relative from your father’s side of the family.”

“What else did you learn?”

“That you have the nervous system of a mage.”

“What do you mean?”

Helen shrugged. “Just what I said. You have a nervous system of a mage.”

Cassandra’s face slowly drained of color. “That cannot be! I am a Seeker, not a mage.”

“Seekers have to get their power from somewhere, though, right? I’ve seen you cast spells during combat.”

“Our abilities come from the Maker!” Cassandra snapped. “And those are not ‘spells!’ Those are abilities learned through years of training!”

“Well, whatever you call them, your body is structured like a mage.”

Cassandra ran her hand through her hair. “It must be a mistake. Perhaps it was the red lyrium?”

Helen doubted it, but said, “Perhaps. I can scan you again if you like.”

“Yes. Do it.”

“Do you have an ability you can use that doesn’t require a sword?”

Cassandra stood and cast a Purge as Helen scanned her. They sat down to look at the results.

“Your nervous system still registers as a mage. See? Here. Look.” Helen tapped on the omnitool. “Here are Solas and Vivienne casting spells.” More tapping. “And here is you.”

They watched side by side comparisons of Solas, Vivienne, and Cassandra. The energy flowed through all three, like water through a river system.

“It is the same.” Cassandra sounded shell-shocked. “Have you told anyone else?”

“No.”

Cassandra began to get a familiar scowl on her face. “Why did you not tell me this before now?”

“Because you didn’t ask until now.”

“That is a ridiculous answer! Why would it ever occur to me to ask you this?”

“Why would it occur to me that was even relevant? You aren’t sick. This isn’t something that needs medical attention. And it has nothing to do with my mission, which is to close the Breach!”

The women glared at each other until Cassandra deflated and said, “Forgive me, Herald. I should not bark at you so.”

Helen stood up and grabbed a random bottle of wine from the box under her bed. She poured them each a generous mug of a dark, heavy red.
After a long swallow, Cassandra said, “What did you and Solas say to each other?”

“Nothing worth repeating.”

“Will you go talk to him?”

“No. But I do have a favor to ask of you.”

“Name it.”

“Don’t burn my body after I die. It will release eezo into the air. Bury me instead, preferably away from a water source.”

“You are not going to die tomorrow.”

“Then it won’t be a difficult promise to keep.”

“If you truly believe you will die tomorrow, go talk to Solas. You have been friends for too long to allow it to end like this.”

Helen put her mug on the table and grasped Cassandra’s wrist. “Bury my body, Seeker Pentaghast. Promise me.”

Cassandra met her eyes for a moment, and then gave a solemn nod. “I promise.” She drained the last of her wine and stood up. “It is late. We all need rest for tomorrow. Especially you. Sleep well, Herald.”

“Good night, Cassandra.”

Helen stared into her empty mug for several minutes after her friend’s departure.

Cassandra was right. Helen should go talk to Solas. It would only take a few minutes to explain what her true intentions had been tonight.

Solas would listen to her. She knew he would. He would likely apologize for what he’d said, or, at least, he would apologize for hurting her feelings.

But Helen could not stomach the thought of seeking him out. She had wanted Solas to believe her, certainly. Failing that, she had wanted to know the omnitool was in good hands.

And somewhere, in a place she did not want to look at too closely, she had wanted him to hold her the rest of the night.

What did you expect? That Solas would overcome a lifetime of bigotry just for you?

Yes. She had. She had expected exactly that. Helen could hardly bear to admit just how wrong she had been.

She wondered if Solas had figured out the puzzle box yet. She hadn’t designed it to be difficult. She’d designed it to be a keepsake, one that would only unlock to the unique infrared frequency of his healing spell.

Feeling restless and trapped, she put on her armor, doused all the lights and slipped out into the night.

***
As everybody had stood in the Ambassador’s office and discussed the veracity of Helen’s claims, Solas had studied the globe in his hands. Why did that tiny green light look so familiar?

_Fenhedis._

It was the Mark.

He left without explanation and went straight to his cabin. Once inside, he sat down at his table and ran a healing spell over the small green light on the globe.

There was a soft click, and the globe opened up at the equator. He tipped the contents into his hand.

There were two slips of paper, and the Token of the Packmaster, that enchanted wolf tooth that he’d given Helen months ago in the Hinterlands.

One slip of paper had a scanned image of the Token and read:

**WARNING: irradiated specimen. Handle with appropriate safety gear.**


The second paper was an image of his own wolf jawbone pendant hanging around his chest.

*Canis lupis lupis.* Common wolf. Fully intact left mandible from adult male. Spectrometry reveals specimen is partially fossilized and approximately 7500 years old. Descended +/- 1800 galactic standard years from Alpine batch CANLU-47N.

Solas let the scraps of paper fall from his hands.

_After this is over, I would like to talk to you. Alone._

When Helen had spoken those words, a small part of his imagination had gone to the bed in his cabin.

He was a fool. She had not wanted him alone for his company. No, she had wanted to convince him he was human! The story of the Initiative, the explanation of the Milky Way and the “modification” of humans, all of it had been directed at _him!_ This little puzzle box was just a part of her ridiculous ploy!

He angrily stuffed the slips of paper back into the globe when he noticed something else. Etched inside the globe was a single word.

“Trafalgar.”

It took him a moment to recognize it as the name of a frigate Helen had once served on.

He did not understand its meaning, but something about it broke through his anger. In its place, Solas felt the yawning ache of uncertainty.

Helen had put that word inside a box meant just for him. There was more she had planned to tell him, apparently, but he had once again allowed his temper to get the best of him.

He desperately missed Wisdom. Never had he needed his friend’s counsel more. He gently closed
the globe and stared into the fire.

***

Cullen sat at the desk in his tent and wrote in his diary.

Tonight, the Herald showed us where she came from, and how she got here.

Every time something in her life felt familiar to me, she followed it with something bizarre. She grew up on a farm that harvested wind. She joined a Navy that sailed the stars. Blue women and tall frogs and raptors in armor were her friends and comrades in arms.

Judging from the recordings she showed us, some of them were a great deal more than that to each other. I can still hardly believe it. Maker’s Breath, she made Garrett Hawke blush.

But then she said that all of us--dwarves, elves, humans and even Qunari--are descended from her own people. She said she’d known this since she’d arrived. She seemed irritated that nobody else had realized it, too. “Any farmer would have known,” she said.

A sharp double knock on the tent pole announced one of his men outside. “Enter,” he said.

A grizzled old guardsman ducked in and beckoned him outside. “Ye should come and see, Commander.”

The guardsman led Cullen to the edge of the barracks and pointed across the lake.

He saw the profile of a small, lonely figure sitting on the end of the pier, chin resting on her knees. It was the Herald, huddled in furs and staring at the Breach.

“I sent a scout to check on the lass. She said she was fine, but summa the men, they worry she’ll run off.”

“She won’t.”

“Aye, but ye know what young ‘uns is like. They’d be scared and tempted to flee, so they think she must be, too.”

“She wouldn’t,” Cullen repeated.

“Well, I figured ye should know.”

“Thank you. I’ll take care of it.”

Cutting straight across the ice was the shorter path, but also far more dangerous. Instead, Cullen headed through the edge of the village, past the abandoned shack and the old gates.

He found the pier and walked to the end of it, where the Herald sat with her arms wrapped around her knees.

“I told the scout I was fine, Commander. You did not have to come all the way out here.”

“I know, but the men worry you might flee before closing the Breach.”

She looked up at him, offended shock all over her face. “I would never abandon my duty!”

“I know that, too.”
The Breach cast an eerie light, and it made her eyes look too large for her face. It reminded him of the first War Room meeting, when she had walked in looking like a child in her father’s armor.

He squatted down on his haunches so they were eye to eye. “I won’t ask if you if everything is all right, because I know it isn’t. If you want me to leave, I will.

“But I should give you fair warning. If you insist on staying out here alone, your next visitor is likely to be Leliana, and she’s a lot meaner than I am.”

The Herald gave a soft, surprised laugh but quickly grew somber again. “I apologize, Commander. I never intended to make you or anyone else lose sleep.”

“You didn’t. I was still up. I was writing in my journal, actually. I’m trying to get back in the habit.”

“Are you eating? Getting enough fluids?”

He shrugged. “Trying to get back into the habit.”

The Herald scooted over, tacitly inviting him to sit. Cullen eased himself into a sitting position and dangled his legs off of the pier. The Herald went back to staring at the Breach.

Cullen wanted to ask her whether everything she had said tonight was true. He wanted to ask about lyrium. He wanted to know more about the world she came from and he really wanted to see that glittering galaxy again.

But asking about his own needs and desires seemed selfish. He cast about for something appropriate to say, and landed on, “I’m sorry about your parents. I’m sure they would be very proud of you.”

“I’m not.”

Cullen looked over at her. “What do you mean?”

“Ever since the Clinton scandal sent me back out into the field, I’ve told myself that I was still a lab tech at heart, just a researcher caught up in a temporarily awful situation.

“But the fact is, I’ve spent more of my adult life in active combat than I ever did in a laboratory. I’m far better at killing people than I was at research.”

“No offense, Herald, but that's true for most soldiers.”

“Maybe so, but I know what my parents wanted for me. It wasn’t the ability to kill a man in my sleep.”

Unsure how to respond, Cullen stared down at the frozen lake. They sat there for quite some time, not saying anything at all.
Eventually, the Herald stood up and stretched. She held her hand out to him to help him stand. He didn’t need the help. He took it anyway.
They walked back to Haven. Just before they got to the barracks, the Herald said, “Thank you for keeping me company, Commander.”

“It was my honor, Herald.”

He felt like he should say something else, something important. But nothing came to mind. All he could think to do was salute her and watch her walk away.

Chapter End Notes

Huge, huge, huge shoutouts to my betas. Chapters like this throw around a lot of lore while describing entirely off-camera scenes. They are both irreplaceable. Any continuity errors are my fault, not theirs.

And ProcrastiKate has blessed us with a gorgeous render for the end of the chapter. We are all damn lucky to have her.

I have several dozen comments that I have not yet responded to. Unfortunately, I am currently at a point in my life where I may not be able to get to them all. I will try, though. I appreciate all of you more than you can possibly know. I read every single comment and I wish I had the time to respond right away.

Lastly, a quick note about tumblr: I have found their entire approach to "cleaning up porn" to be a total joke. They pulled down an original drawing of mine because you can see the outline of Lavellan's nipple. The artwork wasn't even all that great. Honestly, I would have rather they just said, "Don't quit your day job," and pulled it down because I can't draw for shit. But no. They pulled it down because nipple outline. Reposts I've made about breast health, breastfeeding and the like, all taken down. Meanwhile, I get at least two or three pornbot followers every week. I am so over tumblr. If you know of any good alternatives, I'm in the market.
Chapter fifty-three

Chapter Summary

Helen closes the Breach.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-three

Solas knew how Helen saw the world. Her assertion that they were “all the same people,” should not have angered him so. He had allowed Sera to get under his skin, and then he had directed his venom at Helen, who did not deserve it.

He owed her an apology for his tone, if not his words.

But the very thought of begging Helen’s pardon, again, chafed at him. She was wrong about elves, dwarves, and humans.

He told himself that it was unwise to apologize just yet. He would be hard-pressed to fully explain himself without risking exposure. It was a danger he could ill afford, not when they were so close to sealing the Breach.

He told himself that most of the people in that room would have wholeheartedly agreed with him, had they understood what he had said.

He told himself that the only person who had believed Helen was Sera. That alone was nearly enough to prove Helen wrong.

But the simple fact was that having spoken his truth, Solas found himself unwilling to take it back.

The procession out to the Temple was a somber affair. Helen rode at the front, with Leliana and Cassandra on either side of her. She never once looked behind her. Nor did she engage in any conversation.

When they arrived, Solas helped Fiona position the mages into place. Cullen and his Templars stood behind them, ostensibly to protect against abominations. Solas wondered if their real purpose was to prevent any mage from fleeing.

Finally, he joined Helen and Cassandra beneath the rift.

Helen was trembling, her face pale and grim. The mark fluctuated wildly through her hand. She had chewed her lower lip bloody. But she stood up straight, her shoulders squared, as she glared at the rift.

The sight filled him with shame. An apology would have been so simple. Now, it was too late.
He and Cassandra shouted orders to the mages. Solas gave his signal, and a force wave of magic rushed forth.

Helen struggled to walk through all of the ambient energy. Still, she pushed forward and raised her hand to the rift. The connection yanked on her hard enough to bring her to her toes. She swore and but held on.

Solas could sense the Breach slowly drawing into itself, like a bag being pulled closed. All he could do now was add his magic to rest. He slammed the butt of his staff into the ground and took a knee.

He had expected that joining the combined magic of mortals would be like stepping into a stream. Instead, it was like being thrown over the Mintaver Falls.

He could feel them, all of them! He recognized the magic of the people he knew. He felt fierce, maternal protection from Fiona. Hawke’s magic spoke of angry atonement. Vivienne kept a tiny fraction of her icy will to herself because, even in this, she was vain enough to maintain an elegant pose. Dorian’s pure, cerebral focus observed everything through a deep understanding of magic that Solas both recognized and respected.

He could even sense Cassandra, her faith in Helen clear and uncomplicated.

Then Helen gasped in pain. Solas put aside his wonder at the abilities of the mortals and focused with all his might.

Sathan. He directed his will to the Breach above him. It almost became a prayer. Sathan. Sathan, Helen.
The Breach began to resist. It pushed back against the tiny human that dared tell it what to do. Helen shouted defiantly in her language. Solas felt the magic suddenly converge clean and pure through the Anchor, and the Breach snapped shut.

The force of it knocked all of them over. Solas landed on his side, temporarily dazed. In the few moments it took for his hearing and vision to clear, he reached out with his magic to the sky.

It was sealed. She had done it.

Cassandra stumbled past him to get to Helen. Solas tried to prepare himself for the sight of Helen’s tiny body.

Then he heard her quiet, incredulous laugh.

As cheers erupted from the throats of the others, a wave of shocked, triumphant joy filled his heart. She was alive.

How he wished to go to her. He longed to embrace her, to raise his voice with the others in celebration.

But even here in this moment, Fen’ Harel had work to do. Solas hung back and rapidly reassessed what Helen’s survival meant for his plans.
She had made it abundantly clear that she would leave the Inquisition after the Breach was closed. Where was the better chance to retrieve his orb? With Helen, alone, but in possession of the
Anchor? Or with the Inquisition and all of its resources? Could he convince her to stay with the Inquisition, even after last night?

He sifted through probabilities as quickly as he could. Then he felt eyes on him and glanced up from his ruminations.

Helen was looking at him, a wounded expression on her face.
It suddenly occurred to him how this must all look to her. They had quarreled last night. He had been both unfair and unkind. Now, he alone stood silent while everyone else cheered her success.

Solas quickly added his voice to the others but it was too late. Helen had turned away.

He needed to apologize.

But first, Solas had to slip into the Fade and inspect the area around the Breach. It did not take long but by the time he was done, Helen and the others had gone ahead of him.

Then, once he got back to Haven, he had to locate Cassandra, and inform her of his findings.

He found the Seeker in the War Room, standing at the War Table.

“The Veil is scarred, and the Fade will always carry the echoes of what happened here in Haven. But the Breach is sealed.”

She thanked him and asked, “What of you, Solas? Will you stay with the Inquisition? We could not have done this without you. You have a place here if you wish it.”

He inclined his head. “Thank you.”

“The Herald intends to leave. I am going to speak with her now, to convince her to stay. We still need her.”

“I agree.”

Cassandra crossed her arms. “Do you know, last night I asked the Herald what the two of you argued about? She refused to tell me.”

Solas said nothing.

Cassandra gave him a very pointed scowl. “Perhaps, if you were to go to her and work out your differences, she would be more inclined to stay.”

“Perhaps.”

Then she surprised him by placing her hand on his shoulder and looking at him with concern. “Even if she will not stay, talk to her anyway. She cares for you a great deal, Solas. I know you care for her, too. We need more friendship in this world, not less.”

“I--thank you,” Solas said, quite moved by Cassandra’s concern for him.

She nodded and let go. “I am going to speak to her now. You are welcome to join me.”

“I will follow shortly,” he decided. As Cassandra walked past him, he turned and asked, “Seeker, do you believe the Herald? Do you believe what she showed us last night?”

Cassandra shifted uncomfortably. “Much of what she told us last night, and what she told me in private, it troubles me. It goes against everything I know to be true.”

“Then you do not believe her?”

“I do not want to believe her. That is not the same thing.”
“No,” Solas frowned. “It is not.”

Cassandra left. Solas went back to his cabin and retrieved the wolf tooth token. Then he went looking for Helen.

He found Helen and Cassandra talking near the requisitions area. He stood a polite distance away and waited for them to finish speaking.
“‘Freelance abolitionist?’ The Seeker sounded outraged.

“Yes.”

“You cannot be serious!”

“I’ve already spoken to Hawke. He’s going to put me in touch with a friend of his. Besides, what else am I going to do? It’s not like I can go back to researching wetware.”

“You could stay here! We need you. Nobody else can seal rifts.”

“I’ll seal every rift I come across. Send word if you find any others, and I will make time.”

“It is more than lingering rifts, Herald. You know what we face.”

“I know I don’t belong here. That was made quite obvious last night.”

The Seeker sighed, “Maker, you are stubborn. You really should talk to--”

“FORCES APPROACHING! TO ARMS!” The Commander’s cry rang throughout the night.

In the distance, Solas heard a noise that tugged at his memory. Then he recognized it and unstrapped his staff.

It was boots, thousands of them, marching on Haven.

**

Cullen’s warning raised the hair on the back of Helen’s neck. She and Cassandra ran to the front gates. Solas joined them before they were halfway there.

Behind her, she heard Threnn ordering her people to put up barricades. Adan sounded like he was panicking a bit. She heard him run towards his lab.

She turned to tell Adan to grab anything that might help the medics and to head to the Chantry.

She never got the words out. Seggritt, that rat-faced bastard, stopped Helen as she got close to the gate.

“It’s always something,” he complained. Then he waved his hands in frustration as if Helen was being lazy on the job. “You’re important, go protect us!”

Helen pushed him out of her way. He may have landed on his ass. She didn’t look back to see.

Cullen delivered dire news. A large army of unknown provenance marched on Haven.

Helen began to issue orders. “Josie, find the medics and get them to the Chantry. Tell them to prepare for casualties.

“Leliana, tell Fiona and her mages to suit up.”

Then she threw her head back and shouted, “GROUNDTEAM! TO ME!”

Somebody banged on the gate. A boy’s voice said, “I can’t come in unless you open!”
Helen ran down and opened the doors, Cullen on her heels.

A heavily armored warrior fell to his knees. Behind him, a skinny boy in a strange hat pulled two daggers out of the dead man’s back.

“I’m Cole!” he squeaked. “I came to warn you, to help.”

“What is this! Who are you?” Helen demanded.

The boy shrank back at her tone but told her that, “the Templars come to kill you.”

He pointed to the top of the ridge.
Two figures stood next to each other, overlooking the army’s approach.
She instantly recognized Corypheus’ wasp-like silhouette, but the shorter man was unknown to her. “Who is that man next to Corypheus?” she asked.

“That’s Samson,” Cullen spat.

“Not who I expected to see,” said Varric’s voice. Helen turned around. The members of her ground team had arrived, as had Hawke.

Garrett saw Corypheus, and growled, “That blighted son of a bitch.” Then he inhaled as if to bellow something.

Varric grabbed Hawke. “No challenges! He doesn’t stay dead, remember?”

Helen tried to fight back the panic in her chest. “I thought I’d prevented this! We took his army!”

“He has another one,” Cole said, blinking at her with milky eyes. Then he added, “He’s very angry you took his mages.”

“Cullen! Give me a plan! Anything!” Helen pleaded.

He gave her the only plan they had. Defend Haven from the front line of attackers. Use the trebuchets to stop the rest of the army.

She looked around. “Where’s Cole?”

“Who?” asked Cullen.

“The boy that just warned us!” She didn’t see him. “Nevermind. Cassandra, Solas, Varric, with me. Everyone else, help Cullen and Fiona defend the walls!”

Hawke and Varric glanced at each other but complied. Helen knew they would prefer to fight together.

It didn’t matter. Her personal issues with Solas didn’t matter. Helen had fought with Cassandra, Varric, and Solas the longest. She needed whatever certainty she could find. The four of them ran to the northern trebuchet. Red Templars approached from the south and the west.

Helen thought she had seen the worst of red lyrium in Redcliffe. She was wrong.

Armor fused to flesh. Red lyrium growing from their bodies. Claws for fingers. Many were no longer recognizably human.

They were fast and strong and seemingly impervious to pain. Solas set one of the horrors on fire. It didn’t scream or run away. As it died, it vomited red lyrium at them.

Varric shot a Red Templar in the eye. It calmly pulled the bolt out its skull. Solas tried to freeze it. It did not stop in its tracks. It did slow down enough that Cassandra could cut off its head.

Helen had to adjust her biotics. Normally, she could Warp armor until it crushed its occupant to death. Red Templar armor crushed just like the rest, but the flesh underneath continued to move.

She could still Pull and Throw. Her Singularities were just as effective at trapping several people at once.

But these Templars did not shriek in terror at finding themselves floating and helpless. They patiently waited until gravity went back to normal.
What truly seemed to confuse them, however, was when she disappeared under her tactical cloak. More than once, when she vanished from sight, some of the Templars would just look for another target. It was as if she had ceased to exist to them. She wondered how much brain damage the red lyrium caused.

The northern trebuchet discharged its load into the advancing horde. A Lieutenant asked them to go check the southern trebuchet, which was not firing.

They ran south, passing the stables along the way.

Mor’Lanun’s body lay on the ground in the stable yard, his head brutally severed from his body. Solas cried out in wordless rage and grief at the sight, but he did not stop running.

The southern trebuchet had been nearly overrun by Red Templar foot soldiers and archers. Only a few Inquisition forces remained standing. By the time they cleared the yard of hostiles, no able-bodied Inquisition soldiers remained capable of crewing the trebuchet.

Helen downed two restoration potions. She had not slept last night. She had been too nervous to eat before she’d closed the Breach. That lack of care was catching up to her.

Then she and Varric took turns to cock and lock the counterweight. Finally, they released the trigger. The boulder in the sling sailed through the air and hit the mountain opposite the lake.

The cheers from the northern end of town told her the news was good. Varric clapped her on the back.

Helen, however, could not celebrate. Her mind was too busy puzzling out why an A-61 Mantis was approaching from the western sky. For one ridiculous moment, she thought the Initiative had heard the EPIRB and had come to her rescue.

Then the Mantis flapped its wings, gave an unholy screech, and launched a stream of red plasma right at the trebuchet.

Helen didn’t move. She didn’t raise a barrier. She just stood there, stupidly angry that the gunship was, in fact, a dragon.

Hands roughly yanked her off the trebuchet just before she would have been incinerated. She hit the ground hard.

Solas kept one arm across her while the other raised his barrier to shield them from the plasma stream that passed briefly overhead. His eyes and head tracked the dragon as he got to his feet. All of the color had drained from his face. “That should not be possible,” he said in a shaky voice.

The fact that Solas was plainly, openly terrified brought Helen back to her senses. She stood up, and ordered, “Everyone back to the gates!”

They ran for their lives, stopping only to help Harritt get into his cabin.

Cullen stood at the entrance, calling for a retreat and hurrying everybody inside. Then he pulled the gates shut.

His assessment was blunt. Their only hope was within the walls of the Chantry. All they could do was get there, preferably with as many survivors as possible.

“At this point, just make them work for it,” he said. He drew his sword and ran up the steps,
calling out for survivors.

Helen and her team fought off an incursion just past the gates, where the Templars had managed to break through the wall. They defeated that group, but it took longer than it should have. The Templars were fresh and had greater numbers. Helen knew it was only a matter of time before Haven was overrun.

She led the ground team up the steps and saw for the first time how much damage the dragon had really done.

Haven was on fire.

To the east, lay a clear path to the Chantry, temporarily free from enemies, thanks to the Commander’s efforts.

To the south, they could hear Flissa in the burning pub, pleading for rescue.

To the north, they could hear Seggritt in a burning cabin, demanding help.

“This way,” Helen said, pulling them towards the pub. “Flissa needs us.”


Lyriumlyriumlyrium.

Cullen’s body and mind begged for it.

He ignored its call as he ran through Haven, looking for survivors. He found two elderly Chantry sisters hiding behind some crates and Seggritt cowering underneath his own merchant’s table.

Seggritt’s stomach was suspiciously bulky. It made a clinking noise when Cullen dragged him out from underneath the table.

“Go to the Chantry, now!” Cullen ordered.

Seggritt pushed him away. “Get your hands off my gold!” the merchant said, his eyes managing to look piggish and mean even here. Then he ran off. A red Templar straggler gave Seggritt chase, but Cullen’s sword removed the Templar’s head.

“Get to the Chantry!” Cullen shouted after Seggritt.

Seggritt ignored him, disappearing behind the door of a cabin on the north side of the square. Cullen turned his energies to getting the Chantry sisters to safety, as they clearly had more sense.

He led the elderly women, trying to be patient with knees and hips that would not move quickly no matter how much they wished it.

Twice along the way, he defended them from Red Templars.

He did not look too closely at the Templars he killed. Maker, please. Don’t let me recognize any of them.

They were almost at the Chantry when the dragon found them.

Cullen heard its wings before he saw it. It landed, black and blighted, on the roof of the Chantry, and gave a scream from the Void itself.
As they watched in horror, it set all of Haven on fire.
Then it flew west and began to circle the village.

LYRIUMLYRIUMLYRIUM.

Cullen threw one of the sisters over his shoulder, picked the other up like a sack of potatoes, and sprinted for the Chantry. Once inside, he all but dumped them on the ground with the medics.

He forced himself to drink some water. It wasn’t what he wanted, what he needed, but he had to do something to make his hands stop shaking.

Then he went looking for the other advisors. He found Leliana and Josephine in the War Room.

“Where’s Cassandra?” Leliana asked.

“With the Herald, looking for survivors. That dragon just took back any time the trebuchets bought us.”

“We heard it land on the roof,” Josephine said.

“I saw it land on the roof. It set damn near everything in Haven on fire in a single breath.” He looked at Leliana. “Is there any way out?”

“No.”

“No secret tunnels, no trap doors when they built the new chantry?”

“No.”

“Surely, there is something we can do?” Josephine pleaded, wringing her hands together.

Cullen and Leliana looked at each other. Cullen mutely shook his head.

“We can make them pay dearly for every life they take,” Leliana vowed.

“How do we do that?” Josephine wanted to know.

“With the last trebuchet,” Cullen said.

“I don’t understa…” Josephine went ashen as she realized what Cullen meant. Her hands flew over her mouth. “No! We cannot do that to these people!”

“Remember what they did to us that future? Torture? Experiments?” Leliana said. “An avalanche will be a mercy compared to what Corypheus will do to them, to us.”

Cullen said, “I’ll go talk to my men, put a team together to get to the trebuchet.” He left the War Room keeping his face as blank as he could.

But inside, he felt sick. It was his job to protect these people, and he had failed.
He found four fast, discrete soldiers, and pulled them into the nave. In quiet tones, he grimly set forth what he needed them to do.

Not one of them shrank back. Every single soldier stood tall and accepted their assignment with quiet strength. Maker, he was so proud of them all.

Then he heard the Herald arrive, as well as Chancellor Roderick.

Roderick was on the shoulder of a strange boy Cullen had never seen before. “He’s going to die,” the boy said about Roderick. Then he told them that Corypheus wanted to kill the Herald.

The boy’s voice sounded familiar. Had Cullen seen him before?

He couldn’t remember and it didn’t matter now, anyway. Cullen pulled the Herald away from the others and told her the truth. They could not survive, but they could choose how they died. “Many don’t get that choice,” he said, as much to convince himself as her.

The strange boy spoke in that eerie voice of his. Roderick wanted to tell them something.

As they listened, Roderick, that constipated, judgmental old pissbag, gave them a spark of hope.

There was a hidden path, through the back of the War Room, that would lead them away from Haven. He had found it once, long ago, by accident.

The Herald listened intently, sucking down a few restoration potions as Roderick spoke.

“I distract Corypheus while you retreat, and scuttle Haven to prevent his army from following,” the Herald said. She looked at Cullen. “What about the trebuchet?”

“I already have a team ready to load it.”

“Send them now, before the rest of that army gets here.”

Cullen directed his men, as Cole helped Roderick get back up. Roderick told the Herald that he would pray for her. She nodded her head in acknowledgment.

Once Roderick was gone, the Herald said, “My ground team struggled to get here. The Templars’ bodies are fast, but their minds are slow. I’m better served using stealth and confusion.”

It took Cullen a moment to realize that she intended to go it alone.

“You had no sleep last night. You’ve been fighting for hours!” he argued.

“The same could be said of you, and you’re leading the entire village out of here.”

“And when the mountain falls? What of your escape?”

She just looked at him.

“Wait here,” he said. He found the nearest supply cache and chose several bottles. He brought them back to her.

“More healing and restoration potion. And these green flasks are pitch grenades. They’ll slow an enemy down. Might be helpful.

“These Red Templars are still Templars,” he said, feeling like he needed to do as much as he could
to help before she left. “Sword and shields always attack from the front. They’re more vulnerable if you can get them to turn around. The archers sometimes kneel before lining up their shot. Makes for a smaller target but they knock over easy.

“Keep them all distracted until we get above the tree line. Wait for my signal before you launch the trebuchet.”

The Herald gave him a searching look, her eyes flicking back and forth between his as if she were weighing his worth.

Then she clasped his wrist with her hand. “Cullen, if I fall, find my body and remember this word. ‘Trafalgar.’”

Cullen was confused at the change in topic. “What?”

“It’s the password to the omnitool. ‘Trafalgar.’ Say it back to me.”

“‘Trafalgar.’”

She let go of him, lifted her right wrist and spoke into her omnitool. She held it out to him. “Say your full name.”

“Cullen Stanton Rutherford.”

“When you find my body, say your name into the omnitool. It will ask you for the password. That will allow you to remove it from me.”

“Wait. What?”

“You’ll be able to watch the battle from my point of view, see what worked and what didn’t against these bastards. You’ll have access to most of Earth’s history, plus all the non-private information I’ve gathered about Thedas. That includes everything I’ve learned about lyrium, for whatever that’s worth.

“And it will have to be you. It won’t unlock for anybody else, so use it well. What’s the password?”

“Um, ‘Trafalgar.’”

She nodded once and started to leave, saying, “Good luck, Commander.”

“Herald!”

She stopped to look at him.

He saluted her, not in the Inquisition’s style, but in her own. “Officer on deck,” he said.

She returned the salute, gratitude in her eyes.

And then she was gone.
Two big shout-outs to both of my betas. They were a giant help on this chapter.

A quick word about the images. Every single image is an in-game screenshot. Solas really looks at you like that when you close the Breach, and Helen really looked back at him like that. If Solas is a part of your ground team for "In Your Heart Shall Burn," he stands between Leliana's tent and the Chantry and eavesdrops on you and Cassandra.

Don't worry, ProcrastiKate fans. She has already made a render for Chapter 54 and it is the coolest.

I'm really, genuinely sorry that I haven't responded to everyone yet. I prefer to answer my inbox before posting a new chapter. I tried to do that last weekend. Here we are, a week later, and all I am is a week behind on posting a chapter I finished up quite some time ago. Anyway, the point of all of this whinging is to say that work has gone way beyond kicking my ass and has officially made me its bitch.

I deeply appreciate each and every single one of you for taking the time to read, review, kudos and everything else you all do.
Chapter fifty-four

Chapter Summary

Helen faces Corypheus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-four

Helen engaged her tactical cloak as soon as she left the Chantry.

The square was temporarily clear of Red Templars. She used her biotics to get on the roof.

Then, she waited.
A group of Red Templars approached the Chantry. When they were nearly at the front door, Helen flung a singularity at them. As soon as they were all trapped, she Warped them with so much force that the explosion made her ears ring. Then she covered herself in a barrier and jumped right into the middle of the whole mess.

Before the Templars could get their bearings, Helen Pulled an archer towards her and stabbed him in the heart with her Omniblade. She Threw one footsoldier into the burning pub and another as far across town as she could.

“COME AND GET ME, FUCKERS!”

Helen sprinted towards the alchemy lab. She needed to use the terrain to her advantage, and that whole part of the village was on fire.

Unfortunately, three Templars were already there. Helen found herself suddenly facing them, with four more on her tail.

She tossed a pitch grenade behind her and cast a singularity in front of her.

The singularity only caught two of the Templars. The third was one of those horrible columns of flesh that shot red lyrium darts from its hands. Helen Threw it into Adan’s burning lab.

She ran past the singularity and dared to turn around.

The pitch grenade had not simply staggered the Templars. It had also acted as an accelerant, igniting the four of them.

Helen heard a disturbance from Adan’s lab. The big red Templar she’d Thrown in there was still alive. It lumbered blindly, waving its arms around like it wanted to grab her.

Helen stepped behind the singularity and shouted, “I’M OVER HERE!”

The Templar headed towards her and ran into its gravity-free compatriots. The whole mess went up in flames.

Helen backed away and watched the entire scene with a detached horror. Seven people--or former people--burned to death right in front of her. None of them made a single sound.

“Cullen, when you see this, let the others know. Red Templars burn just fine, but I don’t know if they’re aware of the pain. If that one had reached me, I’d have been in trouble.”

Satisfied that everything in that area was dead and nothing could follow her, Helen headed down the steps.

Just past the burning remains of Flissa’s pub, a few Templars trudged up the main steps towards the square.

“HEY!” she shouted.

They were surprisingly fast for their size. One closed the distance between himself and Helen in a couple of steps and took a swing at her.

She ducked out of the way and had to drop and roll to avoid being hit by his backhand. She tried to Throw him, but her aim was off. The glancing blow staggered him, but he did not fall.

She engaged her tactical cloak to get some distance between herself and the Templar. *Solas isn’t*
The Templars turned around in a circle once or twice, looking for her. Then he headed towards the Chantry.

This time, her Throw did not miss. The Templar sailed through the air and knocked over two of his friends. They crumpled under his weight but immediately tried to get back on their feet. It was like fighting Krogan.

Helen smacked all three into Singularity and hit it with a Warp. The explosion blew the Templars into pieces.

“Cullen, you almost have to take the bigger ones apart to stop them. They’re abnormally strong, but I don’t think their minds are fully their own. Some of them struggle with object permanence.”

She scanned the bodies, or what was left of them. “Get the result to the medics and Adan. Maybe they can find something useful.”

When she got past the market stalls, she found one of the soldiers Cullen had sent to load the trebuchet. The elf looked to be in his mid-20s. He was on his back, an arrow in his throat. Two dead Templars lay nearby.

Helen sighed and squatted down next to him long enough to close his eyes. “Let this man’s family know that he died with his sword in his hand.”

She quickly downed another restoration potion, turned on her tactical cloak and crept towards the trebuchet yard.

*Shit. Shit shit shit.*

The other three Inquisition soldiers lay dead on the ground. An equal number of Red Templars now patrolled the trebuchet. The western barricade wall had been breached.

Helen couldn’t tell whether the trebuchet was loaded or not. But she *could* tell it was facing the wrong direction. There was no cover, save for the trebuchet itself, which she couldn’t use, lest she risk damaging it.

“Well, this is going to suck,” she muttered.

She took a deep cleansing breath, then Threw the nearest Templar over the stone wall, aiming for one of the burning buildings in Haven. She disposed of the other two with a Singularity-Warp combination.

Then she inspected the trebuchet.

It was loaded. The soldiers had done what they could before they had been killed. Helen immediately began to turn the crank.

The trebuchet hadn’t moved 10 degrees before a couple of Templars entered the yard. A few more made their way down the southern path. Helen had to cat-and-mouse around the yard for several minutes before she had killed them all and could get back to the crank.

It seemed to go on like that for hours. Turn the trebuchet a few degrees. Stop when Red Templars arrived. Skirmish. Return to the trebuchet. Repeat.
When she was at the crank, she narrated any information she thought might be useful.

“Did you see that big knight building the other one up? Interrupt that process as soon as you can. The end result is awful.”

“The horrible ones that look like they’re all covered in thick flesh? They wiggle their shoulders before they shoot darts of red lyrium out of the palms of their hands. They’re fast, but if you can stop that wiggle, they have to start over.”

“I think they’re deliberately sowing the ground with red lyrium. It’s going to feed on all of these bodies. Haven really ought to be quarantined after this.”

“I don’t know how their armor is—mother fucker!” Helen’s barrier popped into place as an arrow came very close to finding her heart. She stepped away from the crank and found the archer. She Pulled him to her and screamed, “The fuck is wrong with you people?” Then she stabbed him in the throat.

Helen let the body drop to her feet. She stared at it numbly as she sucked down another restoration potion.

She was beyond merely tired. She was approaching a critical level of exhaustion.

“God, Cullen, I hope you’re making progress. I don’t know how many more of these fights I can win.”

She heard crunching rocks behind her. Helen turned to look, and on instinct Pulled herself across the yard to avoid being crushed by a club of red lyrium.

A wall of red crystals shot up from the ground in front of her, stopping her momentum. She spun around.
A monster, at least 3 meters tall and made almost entirely of red lyrium, stood at Helen’s spot by
the crank.

Helen swiftly took in her position. Red wall of Lyrium at her back. Hostiles approaching on her
flanks. Big monster shitshow in front.

The monster charged.

Helen rolled out of the way at the last second. The monster crashed through the crystals behind
her. This did not hurt it one bit, but at least it knocked down the wall.

She Threw the nearest archer into the fires of Haven, then engaged her tactical cloak. Another
archer shot at her anyway. Helen was breathing so hard now that they could hear her position.

Her only chance was to place that behemoth of a Templar in Stasis and pick off his smaller friends
one by one.

The upside to Stasis was that it gave Helen more control over the battlefield. The downside was
that it acted as a slow, constant drain on her. She would have to sacrifice her barrier to keep it
going.

She disposed of all the archers first. Without a barrier, she was most vulnerable to projectiles.

A pitch grenade slowed down the largest group of footsoldiers. Helen turned them into ballistic
weapons, Throwing them into other Templars. It knocked them down, covered them in pitch, and
kept them off-balance.

It was reasonably effective, for being all on her own, but she still took more blows more than she
could afford. One Templar managed to sneak up behind her. She heard him at the last second and
turned away, so his sword only managed a glancing blow against the cuirass.

The fur armor kept the blade from penetrating too deeply, but she felt her back begin to bleed. She
Threw the Templar into the flames on the other side of the wall.

A knight with crystals growing out of its back broke away from the scrum and charged her. Helen
dropped to the ground to avoid his fists. He kicked her like a soccer ball across the yard.

She dropped the Stasis just long enough to barrier her fall. The knight was already almost on top of
her. She reacted on instinct. Her biotic kick sent him flying through the air, impaling him on a
spiked, wooden barricade.

In just those few short seconds, the red giant realized it was free and slammed its club hand onto
the ground. Helen put it back in a Stasis field, but it hurt. That biotic kick had taken a lot out of her.

Finally, it was just her and the red giant. Her biotics were flagging. She had no idea how to kill this
thing.

The trapped behemoth stared at Helen with emotionless eyes. She stared right back she chucked the
remaining pitch grenade at its feet, hindering any step in every direction.

She dropped the Stasis field. The pitch slowed it down, but not by much.

A Singularity at its feet knocked it over but did not trap it. Pull and Throw had little effect.
Helen tried Warp. She heard a cracking noise from deep inside the monster’s body.

*Oh, thank god.* She Warped it again. Another loud crack. She got in one more Warp before it got to its feet.

With everything she had left, Helen slammed a Shockwave right into it. The behemoth shattered into a thousand shards of red lyrium.

“Son of a bitch,” Helen whispered. She bent over, hands on her knees, and tried to catch her breath. As she did so, she idly watched the red lyrium crystals absorb into the ground.

“Cullen, something is pulling the red lyrium beneath the surface,” she said, still very much out of breath.

Then she went back to the trebuchet. This time, no Templars approached as she turned the crank.

Finally, it was done. She drank her last health potion and waited for Cullen’s signal.

The dragon found her first. The explosion from its plasma stream knocked Helen flat on her ass. As she struggled to rise, Corypheus casually strolled towards her through the flames.

Even though her biotics were shot, even though she *knew* that Corypheus could come back from the dead, Helen still looked for weak spots in his armor or body. For just one mad moment, she thought, *I can take this guy.*

Then the dragon landed right behind her. It *reeked* of red lyrium, befouling the air and turning it sour. The dragon’s skull alone was taller than her.

Corypheus completed his overly dramatic entrance with a magical flourish that made the ground shake.

“Pretender,” Corypheus said.

“Corypheus,” Helen retorted. She let her accent shine through his name, making it sound like an insult.

His steps faltered, just barely.

*What, he’s surprised I know his name?*

Corypheus recovered quickly. “Do you think yourself clever, mortal? It matters not. You will *kneel.*”

“I don’t kneel for *darkspawn.*”

He glared at her, then produced a familiar-looking orb in his left hand. He reached toward Helen with his right.

“I am here for the Anchor. The process of removing it begins now.” He flicked his right hand at her.

Helen’s entire existence sucked into a blinding point of pain, located at the base of her skull.

Corypheus blathered on about something or other, but Helen didn't listen. She was too focused on trying to raise a barrier, or Throw the bastard, or Warp him—*anything* to stop the pain.
Her body would not obey. It was like the orb had overridden her entire nervous system. She felt her implant get hot.

Then the pain and noise abruptly ended. Blood dripped from her nose, and Helen realized she was on her hands and knees.

_Goddammit. Asshole made me kneel._

Asshole also continued to talk, although Helen’s ears were ringing too much for her to understand him.

“Could you repeat that?” she asked. “I wasn't paying attention.”

Corypheus strode over and angrily yanked her up by the left wrist. He dangled Helen like a toddler, her feet almost a meter off the ground.
“I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the Old Gods of the empire in person,” he said, grinding the bones of her wrist together. “I found only chaos and corruption. For a thousand years, I was confused. No more.”

“Debatable,” Helen rasped.

“Silence!” Corypheus shouted. “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 have seen the throne of the gods,” he pulled her way too close to his big, ugly face, “and it was empty.”

“Yeah,” Helen turned her head and spat a bloody gobbet onto the ground. “I could have told you that.”

Corypheus’ expression curled in petulant rage. He tossed her onto the platform of the trebuchet, which was not especially close. Helen couldn't even raise a barrier.

“The Anchor is permanent,” he complained.

“I could have told you that, too.” That was a lie. Helen had not known the Anchor was permanent until just that second, but insolence was the only weapon she had left.

Corypheus seemed to be trying to calm himself down. “So be it. I will begin again, find another way to give this world the nation--and god --it requires.”


Then she saw it. Far away to the east, near the top of the mountain pass, a flaming arrow arched through the sky.

Corypheus continued to talk, too busy adoring the sound of his own voice to notice Helen’s distraction. “You think I require devotion to be a god? I require only obedience.
“And you. I will not suffer even an unknowing rival. You will die.”

“Oh, don’t do me any favors.” Helen kicked the trigger and watched the boulder sail into the mountainside. She stuck around just long enough to enjoy the look of shock on Corypheus’ face. Then she hauled ass.

She felt the avalanche hit Haven, heard buildings collapse and boulders crash. Below her, Helen saw rafters and beams, and jumped.

**

She did not remember hitting the ground. She woke up in a mining tunnel.

Every part of her body hurt but the worst was her left hand and a massive headache. She reluctantly sat up.

Bright, green light seeped through her left glove, so she tugged it off. The Anchor glowed so brightly from the inside out that Helen could see the outlines of her blood vessels and bones.

“Look at what that fucker did to my hand,” she muttered.

She asked the omnitool for a medical report. Broken ribs. Multiple contusions. Neural spiking in her hippocampus. Unknown plasma, torn ligaments, and ongoing radiation damage in her left wrist.

She put her glove back on. Despite her lethargy, she forced herself to get up and walk.

This tunnel had a slight incline to it. The further she walked, the colder it became. After what felt like hours, she saw the mine’s unsealed exit across an antechamber.

Her left hand felt the rift before her eyes saw it. It cracked open before her and vomited out four despair demons. Cold, bitter anguish begin to overtake her.

Then an odd thing happened. Helen raised her hand, and opened a counterrift of sorts, right under the first rift.

The despair demons dissolved into it. Moments later, the demons and the rift were gone.

She had no idea what had just happened. It felt like remembering something for the very first time. Solas would know.

A weary sadness settled in, but Helen pushed it away. She had more immediate problems.

Helen’s steps slowed as she got close to the exit.

A blizzard raged outside.

Helen stood a few meters from the entrance. She did not know where she was. She was injured and dehydrated. The Breach and Corypheus had failed to kill her, but a blizzard just might.

But if she laid down and went to sleep, she’d never get up again.

“Don’t let them burn my body, Cullen. Bury it. Cassandra knows.”

She stepped out into the maelstrom, raised one arm against the wind, and pressed forward.
Chapter End Notes

Everybody, I'm kinda bummed about how long it took me to get this chapter up. Real Life has not allowed enough time for writing these days.

Many thanks, as always, to dreadlordcherrycake and duinemerwen. They were a huge help for both pacing and Mass Effect physics. Still, if there are any mistakes in the lore, that's my fault, not theirs.

ProcrastiKate fans, we have another fantastic render of Helen. It's the closeup of Helen, and it's amazing.

Finally, thank you to everyone who has read, left reviews and comments and kudos. I appreciate all of you very much!!!
Chapter fifty-five

Chapter Summary

Haven evacuates.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-five

Cole watched the Herald as she listened to Chancellor Roderick.

She was small and quiet on the outside, but large and bright on the inside. She remembered him. He could tell because when she looked at him, he heard his name inside her mind.

It was time to move. Cole kept his arm around Roderick to keep the man from falling over. The Chancellor was bleeding inside, and his guts leaked infection into his belly. Cole knew he wouldn’t live very long. Chancellor Roderick knew it, too.

They found Leliana at the back of the Chantry. She looked harder and harsher than she had at the White Spire.

Leliana didn’t remember him. That was probably for the best. “Who are you?” she demanded.

“I’m Cole. I’m here to help.”

She frowned at him until Roderick explained what he knew. Then hope glowed inside of her, pushing some of the anger away.

They led Leliana and a few scouts out the back door. Roderick wheezed as he pointed to the path. Scouts began to clear brush and snow out of the way. One of them exclaimed, “Sweet Andraste, there is a path here!”

“Good. Keep going. I'll tell the others to follow.” Leliana hurried back into the Chantry.

The scouts hacked brambles and overgrowth away as quickly as they could. People, terrified and shivering, pressed in behind them.

They had not gone far when they heard a loud explosion followed by, “COME AND GET ME, FUCKERS!”

People gasped or nervously chuckled. Roderick shook his head in apparent disapproval, but Cole could tell he wasn’t really bothered.

He felt Solas, bright and sad, walking up behind them.

Cole had never met Solas before, but they had recognized each other outside the gates. Oh, Cole had thought. It’s you. Hello.

Solas had only inclined his head in greeting. We will speak later.
Now Solas was beside Cole, one hand half-raised over his head as he cast a barrier of silence around them. “The mages are scattered among the villagers, keeping our movements concealed.”

Roderick squinted over at Solas. “Weren’t you fighting with the Herald?” he asked with alarm in his voice. “Has she…?”

“The Herald still lives, Chancellor. She chose to battle the Red Templars on her own.”

“She wanted to,” Cole said. “Courageous and clever, covering our retreat. ‘My people. My responsibility.’”

This did not make Solas feel better, as Cole had hoped. Before Cole could do anything about it, Solas said, “I welcome you with an open spirit, Cole, but you have come to a dangerous place.”

“But this is where I can help,” Cole explained.

“You have chosen a very difficult path.”

“It’s the only path that will bring us safely out of Haven,” Roderick interrupted defensively, clearly misunderstanding the topic.

“It’s all right, Chancellor. You’ve saved a lot of people today,” Cole said.

“The Herald gave me that chance, Maker guide her,” Roderick said. Cole caught something inside Roderick that he recognized.


“If you see her when this is over…” Roderick's voice trailed off.

Cole understood. It was too much to expect Chancellor Roderick to walk and talk and bleed to death all at the same time.

“I’ll tell her,” Cole promised. Then he added, “You could tell her, too, Solas.”

Solas sighed and pulled his emotions back into the middle.

Up they climbed, sounds of battle drifting up from Haven. Every time they heard an explosion or a battle cry from the Herald, Roderick and Solas radiated with pride. Roderick’s pride was all bright with hope. Solas’ was curled underneath his guilt.

They had just reached the mountain pass when the Herald triggered the avalanche. Everyone turned around to watch. It was so loud! Cole wanted to cover his ears, but he had to hold Roderick.

Then it was over and very quiet. Haven was buried. It made Roderick sad.

Cole felt Solas reach for something with his magic. Then a flicker of hope, hidden and new, burned inside of him.

Solas said, “Keep moving forward. There is something I must do.” He turned back down the mountain.

“Where is he going, I wonder?” Roderick asked.

“To ask the wolves for help,” Cole said. Roderick grumbled about “hedge-mages.”
Solas wasn’t really a hedge-mage, but Roderick didn’t need to know that. Nobody did.

The wind grew louder. Roderick grew weaker. By the time they’d made down the other side of the mountain, Cole was practically carrying Roderick.

The weather got better in the valley, but Roderick got worse. Cole found him a bedroll near a fire. The healer’s tent was in arm’s reach, but Roderick didn’t want to go. Healing would be wasted on him. Magic couldn’t fix everything.

Roderick drifted in and out of consciousness. Cole listened to the others.

Haven was loss on top of loss. Pain swirled around him, raw and real, but also familiar, faithful. Everybody would need to grieve for a while. My family. My friends. My home.

Some people felt more than grief.

Leliana, why didn’t I have more scouts on the perimeter? My fault.

Hawke, like Kirkwall all over again. My fault.

Varric, Corypheus was dead! My fault.

Solas, Haven, harrowing and horrible. Helen’s heart, hurting from my words, my fault. She defends the innocents I placed in danger. My fault. Corypheus, my fault. The world like this, my fault my fault my fault.

Cole couldn't talk to the others yet. Roderick still needed him.

He could help Solas, though.

Haven was Corypheus’ fault, Solas, not yours.

He felt everything from Solas go quiet. A few moments later, Solas came over from wherever he had been and knelt next to Cole and Roderick.

“I apologize, Cole. I did not mean to disturb you.”

“You didn’t. I just want to help.”

Solas gave him a sad smile. His eyes were kind. He wanted to protect Cole. “You are helping.”

Roderick woke up then and noticed Solas. “Has the Herald returned?” he asked.

“Not yet, Chancellor.” Roderick closed his eyes and drifted off.

Cole felt Solas reach out again with his magic, and search for something like he did before. Oh. The Mark. He’s looking for the Mark.

Cole could not feel the Mark directly, but he could feel it through Solas. It was getting close.

So Cole listened in that direction, too. “Please don’t die. Please don’t die. Maker’s Breath, why did she pick me? I can’t even remember the password. Traveler? No. Trefoil? No! What was it?”

“Trafalgar,” Solas sighed. “It was ‘Trafalgar.’” He stood up, sadder than before, and waited.

A minute later, Cullen burst through the camp, the Herald pale and unmoving in his arms. Her left
hand glowed so brightly that it lit up Cullen’s face from below, highlighting the worried shape of his brows.

“Over here, Commander,” Solas said, holding open the flap to the healer’s tent. Cullen carried the Herald inside, and Solas followed them.

Roderick woke up, slightly panicked about not recognizing where he was. Cole squeezed the Chancellor’s hand. Roderick sighed in relief and gratitude, such a kind boy.

“It’s all right,” Cole said. “I'm here to help.”

**

The moment Solas saw the Mark, he knew.

Corypheus had the Orb. Solas had fled Haven with the other survivors, utterly unaware that the one thing he needed most was within reach. Now the Mark extended halfway up Helen’s arm.

“I swear to the Maker, that thing has grown since we found her,” said Cullen, as he placed Helen’s still body on a cot. “Will she be all right?”

“We’ll let you know as soon as we can,” Ser Bennet reassured them.

Cullen left. Solas and Rose knelt on either side of Helen. They used magic to gently remove her armor.

Helen’s torso was covered in enormous, dark bruises. “Somebody kicked her,” said Rose.

“How do you know?” Solas asked. He did not disagree, he was merely curious as to how she knew that.

She pointed to the darkest splotches in the bruises. “Because Templars wear steel-toed boots,” she quietly replied.

Solas felt his anger rise—at the Templars for their attack on Haven; at Helen, for facing them alone; and most of all, at himself, for his utter inability to do anything except fail again and again.

Rose gently ran her fingertips under Helen’s back. “She’s bleeding.”

They turned her over to one side. A shallow laceration marked her from shoulder to waist.

Rose continued to note Helen’s injuries—broken ribs, dehydration, and mild frostbite in her toes.

And of course, the Mark.

Solas let Rose attend to Helen’s more mundane injuries while he worked on the Anchor, which fluctuated wildly without any wards to contain it.

The Anchor was more deeply connected to Helen than ever, but it also felt more malleable, easier to control. Solas coaxed it back down into the palm of her hand and set his wards in far less time than he had expected. He healed fractured ribs as Rose placed a warm compress on Helen’s feet.

He sat back on his heels and scrubbed his face with his hands. He was exhausted. He needed sleep and Wisdom.

“Water.”
Helen’s cracked voice cut into his ruminations. He and Rose helped her sit up and drink from a waterskin. She swallowed it all and then lay back down. He covered her with a blanket.

“Maker, Herald, you gave us quite the scare,” Rose said, using her fingers to comb the hair out of Helen’s face in a very motherly fashion. “What happened out there?”

“Got the shit kicked out of me,” Helen said, her eyes already closed.

“You did not have to go alone,” Solas said, unable to keep some of his emotion out of his words.

“You’re too loud.” Then she was asleep again. Solas could not tell if she was referring to him talking right there, or if that was the reason she had decided to face Corypheus by herself.

“I will let the advisors know that the Herald is out of danger. I appreciate all of your assistance here, Rose.”

She waved a hand. “Happy to help.”

He started to leave, but then asked, “The rest of the medics. Did they survive?”

“We did, all four of us,” said Ser Bennet. "The others are sleeping."

Solas nodded, relieved to know that Owin still lived.

He left and found the advisors standing together in a tight, angry knot. They went quiet as Solas approached, a vain attempt to be discreet about the fact that they were arguing.

“The Herald should make a full recovery, and the Mark is back under control.”

Sighs of relief and “Thank the Makers” issued from the group.

Cassandra briefly touched his arm and said, “Go rest, my friend. You look exhausted.”

Solas went back to the tent he had stored his few belongings in earlier. The other bedrolls were occupied by four soldiers (two humans, an elf, and a dwarf) and Blackwall. All the men seemed to be asleep, but Blackwall opened his eyes as Solas took off his armor.

“How is she?”

“Recovering,” Solas quietly answered.

“Hahren?” The elven soldier was still awake. “You were with the Herald, weren’t you? Is it true you fought that dragon?”

By the time the young man finished his questions, four pairs of impossibly young eyes looked up at Solas.

He and Blackwall exchanged a glance. These boys had never been in battle before, and their first had been a nightmarish defeat.

Solas got onto his bedroll and said, “We ran when we saw that dragon. Had we done otherwise, it would have killed us all, including the Herald. And then nobody would have been left alive to cover our retreat.”

“When which means none of us would be here,” Blackwall said. “We had people to protect, and that’s what we did. There’s no shame in an honorable retreat.”
“Now shut up, the lot of you. I’m knackered.” Blackwall placed his hands on his chest and closed his eyes.

Solas did the same. It took only moments to slip into the Fade.

Sathan, Wisdom. I need you.

Wisdom appeared, took one look at him, and remade the Fade in the image of Solas’ old study in Arlathan.

Wisdom sat at one end of a comfortable sofa, and said, “So. The Breach is closed.”

Solas sat at the other end and unburdened his soul.

He could not list each and every one of his many failures. Such an accounting would have taken several days. Even showing Wisdom the abbreviated version took longer than he expected.

“Corypheus will come for Helen again. She stole one army and destroyed most of another. He will not let such insults lie.

“But until then, the damage that he will do to Thedas while he rebuilds his forces…”

“You need an army of your own,” Wisdom said.

“I need an army of my own,” he agreed. “But the Inquisition is in shambles. I could have them rebuild at Terasyl’an Te’las, but they need a leader. And not just any leader. It needs to be Helen. She has the Anchor and Corypheus has the Orb. I need both.

“Thanks to me, she wants to leave. If she goes, she will not want me at her side. But if she stays, there is the new issue of Cole.”

If Helen wanted or needed to scan Cole, which was entirely plausible, Cole would be inclined to allow it. Indeed, if he was half as curious about the world as Solas had once been, Cole might very well want to be scanned. He would also likely be amenable to answer Helen’s questions.

Asking Cole to keep the identity of Fen’Harel to himself was one thing.

Asking him to refuse to help another was something else, entirely. It would go completely against Cole’s nature. Wisdom and Solas both understood the dangers of that at a deeply personal level.

“Helen has come so close already to understanding what I am,” Solas continued. “Cole could inadvertently provide context that she otherwise lacks.”

“He could, but the fear of discovery did not bring you here, Solas. It is regret. You wished to apologize to her, but chose not to. Why is that?”

“Because I could not tolerate the thought that she might be correct, that we have any connection to the vicious thugs who invaded Thedas and stole it from us. Her assertion that we were all ‘her people’ was, at best, naive, and at worst, a patronizing erasure of us all.”

“And now?”

Solas looked at his hands and rubbed them together. “Now, I have closed the Breach with the mortal mages, including humans, and felt a connection I never thought possible. I watched a human throw herself into the jaws of a monster to save people who had treated her with contempt.
“So now? Now I am filled with shame and sorrow and doubt.”

Then he heard it. They both did.

Singing.

“Thank you, my friend. We will talk again soon,” he said. Then he woke up and quietly made his way to the center of the camp.

The mortals were singing a Chantry hymn and kneeling to Helen.

Her hair was still combed back from her face. It made her expression of utter horror that much easier to see. Mother Giselle watched Helen out of the corner of her eye, a slight smile on her face.

Solas recognized serendipity when he saw it. Everything he needed had just fallen into place.

Almost against his wishes, he felt his pulse quicken with an old, familiar excitement. Controlling the politics from behind the scenes, seeing his casual suggestions move nations-- this he could do. This was his strength.

Cole was still an unknown, but Solas would take that risk in exchange for the gift Mother Giselle had inadvertently given to him.

When the hymn was over, Mother Giselle looked around the encampment with satisfaction. Everybody seemed lighter, happier. More hopeful. Everyone, that is, except Helen, who looked like she was seriously considering punching a Chantry Mother.

He heard Mother Giselle say, “It’s all one world, Herald. All that changes is our place in it.” Then she walked away, regally inclining her mitered head at the faithful.

Solas came up behind Helen. “A word?” he said, as he walked past, his mind already at the edge of camp and on what he needed to tell her.

It took a few steps before he realized she was not following. He turned around and saw the expression on her face.
In his excitement, he had nearly forgotten that Helen was still quite angry with him.

“Please,” he added.

He watched her push down her anger and arrange her face into the professional mask she used with people she disliked but still needed to work with. Solas led her out past the encampment to an empty brazier. He lit it with Veilfire and clasped his hands behind his back.

Helen stared at the flickering, blue light and said nothing. His excitement from a few moments
before evaporated, and he decided to take a cautious approach.

“A wise woman, worth heeding, “ he said, referring to Mother Giselle.

“What do you want, Solas?” Helen said. She sounded exhausted.

“To apologize, which is long overdue and could not possibly make up for my poor behavior. I should have come to you much sooner. Ir abelas, Helen.”

She did not look at him, not once. She merely stared at the Veilfire. After a moment, she said, “Was there anything else you needed?”

He told her that he had explored the Fade and had found an ancient stronghold to the north. It would house the refugees and give the Inquisition a place to rebuild.

She finally looked at him. He almost wished she had not. She was lovely and within reach of his fingertips, but her eyes held nothing but distance.
As soon as he was done with his explanation, she nodded once and looked back into the Veilfire. “Thank you, Solas. This is extremely helpful. I will let the advisors know at once.”

Her voice was professionally detached. It felt empty and wrong, and he hated it.

She started to leave. “Helen, wait. Please.”

The mask looked back at him.

“If you do not mind my asking, what happened between you and Mother Giselle?”

She raised her eyebrows, slightly surprised at the question. “She gave the Maker all the credit for my survival. I told her I had good armor from Harritt and extra supplies from Cullen. Four soldiers gave their lives to load that trebuchet.

“That wasn’t divine intervention. It was real people doing their jobs. I told her I would not thank the heavens for what real people did right here in the real world.”
“Her response was to start singing.”

“I see. And now, they are all ‘your people.’”

It was a deliberate reference to their argument in the Ambassador’s office. He hoped it would provoke something other than polite detachment.

Helen did not rise to the bait. She only nodded.

“Because you see all of us as human,” he noted.

“No. I mean, yes, I see you all as homo sapiens, but that has nothing to do with it.”

“Then why?”

“Because you’re all my responsibility. That means being responsible.”

“A blessed hero, sent to save us all?” Just like the last time he’d said that to her, he could not entirely hide the bitterness in his voice.

“It’s my job, Solas!” she said with exasperation. “My crews, the people we rescued, Atticus and his Huskers, they were all my people.

“Here on Thedas, that means my ground teams, refugees in the Hinterlands, soldiers in the Fallow Mire, or the residents of Haven. As long as I’m responsible for their safety, they’re my people.”

Now it was Solas’ turn to stare into the Veilfire.

“And ‘Trafalgar?’” he asked.

“No longer matters.” He could hear the hurt fraying the edges of her voice.

“My words must sound hollow now, given everything that has transpired, but truly, Helen, I am sorry. You deserved the benefit of the doubt, especially from me. Instead, I misjudged you.”

“Misjudged’ me?” Her pain was so loud she had to whisper her words, and tears pooled in her eyes. “Solas, you abandoned me.

“Do you really think that I walked up to that rift worrying about biology? Or politics? I was terrified! You were the only person who knew what truly frightened me, and you said nothing!”

Tears spilled out of her eyes. He wanted to wipe them away.

“But still, when it was over, and the Breach was closed, like an idiot, I only looked for one person. And you were just…” Helen shook her head again and wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“I know what bigotry looks like, Solas. I saw it in C-Sec officers on the Citadel, and Asari shopkeepers on Illium, and Batarians on Omega.

“But I never thought I’d see it staring back at me from the eyes of somebody I loved,” she said. “So I guess that means I misjudged you, too.”

Solas stood immobile, the magnitude of his mistake becoming horribly clear. He knew Helen had misinterpreted his actions after she’d closed the Breach—but he could hardly tell her the truth.
“Helen.” Her name was an exhale.

She stood up straight and rearranged her face into the mask. “It’s ‘Herald,’” she corrected. As she walked away, Solas came to three terrible realizations all at once.

She had admitted she loved him.

He loved her back.

He had just made everything impossibly worse.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to my betas dreadlordcherrycake and duinemerwen, for their valuable feedback on this chapter. This one had a lot of moving parts, and my betas helped keep it coherent.

No ProcrastiKate renders this chapter, just a couple of my own screenshots.

My RL schedule is showing no signs of slowing down. I have come to accept that it is simply my new normal. The writing continues, though, almost every day, even if it's just a bit here and there. I appreciate all of your patience and support.

Finally, thank you to all of you for reading, reviewing and/or kudos.

P.S.--I forgot to mention that Helen has a new hairstyle. It's "HF EF DH Medium Length Hair" by modder Xirthyara. I should have mentioned it when I first posted the chapter, and I didn't, which was inconsiderate of me. (So, my apologies to Xirthyara!) I've added the link to the Half-Life Mod list page.
Chapter fifty-six

Chapter Summary

The journey to Skyhold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-six

Mother Giselle and Cassandra led a memorial service for Roderick. Cullen himself built the Chancellor’s pyre. As they burned Roderick’s body, he recited:

I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Fade

For there is no darkness, nor death either, in the Maker’s Light

And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.

Andrastrian or no, everybody wept. Haven was now a mass grave. Roderick’s funeral was a stand-in for the dead who would never be recovered.

When it was done, they began the trek north, with Solas and the Herald leading the way.

Cullen quietly prayed as the day wore on, unsure how else to handle the crippling doubt he felt.

He had always despised the Chancellor. Roderick was a pedantic, self-righteous bureaucrat who represented the pettiest traditions of the Chantry.

Yet when everything else had fallen apart, Roderick had found a way to save them.

By the same token, Cullen had always felt sympathetic towards Raleigh Samson. Giving Samson a second chance with the Kirkwall Templars had been one of the few things Cullen had done under Meredith’s reign that he’d felt reasonably good about.

Then Samson stood at Corypheus’ side and gleefully sent an army of monsters to march on Haven.

Had lyrium clouded his judgment about Samson? Cullen’s dose back in those days had been ridiculously high.

Maybe the problem was the lack of lyrium. Had Cullen’s withdrawal caused him to judge Roderick too harshly? He’d misjudged the Herald, too, after all.

The Herald had never known him back when he still had his dose, and thus had only ever seen him at his worst. Yet she’d still encouraged him to not take it. He wondered if she’d change her mind, now that she’d seen how formidable their enemy was.

He watched her back as she led them all through the snowbound hills at a steady pace. Sometimes, she glanced over her shoulder or walked backwards for a few paces to keep an eye on everybody’s
progress.

It was hard to believe she was up and about, much less leading them all. Maker knew she’d been in bad enough shape when he’d carried her down the mountain.

The entire experience had unnerved him. Cullen had tried to get her back to the encampment as quickly as he could without stumbling. The Mark fluctuated and grew as they descended. Cassandra, Maker save him, kept saying things like, “Do not drop her, Cullen,” as if he would have done so on purpose.

Cullen, to his deep shame, still could not remember the password the Herald had given him. It’s the lyrium. If you’d been taking it, you would have remembered. Don’t bother the Herald with this. She doesn’t need to--

“Hullo, Cullen!” Hawke interrupted Cullen’s thoughts with a slap on the back as he walked past him.

Cullen shook his head at the bottle of rum in Garrett’s hand. Cullen knew that Hawke could hold his liquor, but here? Now? Really?

Cullen’s mild objections turned into outright disapproval when Garrett walked up between Solas and the Herald, and casually slung his arm around her shoulders.

What in the bloody void was Garrett Hawke doing?

**

For hours, Solas and Helen led the way in strained silence.

Helen knew she was acting somewhat unfairly towards Solas. After all, he had rushed to her side the moment Haven was attacked. He’d saved her life from both the dragon and the Mark.

Now, he was saving all of their asses. She needed to get over herself.

*Everybody behind you lost people they loved and everything they owned. All you lost was a toothbrush. Don’t cry, don’t bitch, don’t blame.*

But then she’d remember how Solas had demanded “a word” as he’d zoomed past her, so sure she would follow. Or how perfunctory his initial apology had been, like it was just something he’d needed to get out of the way. Not to mention, there was still the whole *abandonment* thing. And the *bigotry* thing.

And how could she possibly forget how she’d accidentally admitted both to herself and to him out loud that she loved him?

Actually, now that she’d thought about it, fuck Solas.

It didn’t help that he appeared utterly serene while Helen grew bitchier by the hour. She hadn’t eaten anything since the day before, and that hadn’t been much. She couldn’t trust herself not to ask things like, “Hey, have you fucked all the way off yet?”

So, Helen said nothing.

Solas said nothing.

The higher they climbed, the weirder it got. Just when she thought about triggering another
avalanche to ease the tension, a bearded face popped up right between them.

“Herald!” Hawke flung his right arm around Helen’s shoulders. “Aaaand Solas.” Hawke’s left arm went around Solas’ neck, dangling an open bottle of rum just under Solas’ chin.

“How’s everything here at the front of the line? Have you two kissed and made up yet? Varric has a betting pool going, but I’ve already lost. I said you’d be holding hands by now.”

Even by his own standards, Solas looked offended.

In truth, Helen was offended, too, but she wasn’t going to let Solas know it. “What’s the split?” she asked.

“Winner takes half. Varric will use the other half to get everyone drunk.”

“Ah. Drinking. That should make for quite the change,” Solas scoffed. He slid out from under Garrett’s arm and let them go on without him.

“Oh, look. He buggered off,” said Hawke blithely, keeping his arm around Helen.

He took a drink and then used the hand holding the bottle to point one finger at her. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

“You and everyone else. What’s on your mind?”

“You running off to kill Corypheus and not bringing me.”

“I didn’t bring anybody.”

“I don’t care whether you ‘brought anybody,’ you didn’t bring me! Corypheus was my responsibility.”

“Not in Haven, he wasn’t. Corypheus was there for me. That made him my responsibility. Besides, I wasn’t trying to kill him, I was covering a retreat.”

“By yourself,” he accused.

“Yes, Hawke. By myself,” Helen said impatiently. “Evacuations take time. My tactical cloak confused the Red Templars, and I needed to distract them for as long as possible. I was the quietest one on my team. A solo mission gave the best odds.”

Hawke looked down at her. For all of his boozy bluster, his eyes were clear, and his speech steady. Helen had the distinct impression he was quite sober.

“The next time you go after that blighted son of a bitch, don’t you dare go without me. I have a score to settle, and I want to be there.”

“Done.”

“Oh!” Hawke relaxed when he realized Helen wasn’t going to argue with him. “Well. That’s all right, then.”

He offered her the bottle. She looked at it and asked, “Is there really a betting pool?”

“I may have exaggerated a bit. There is a lot of speculation, though, especially after that lover’s quarrel you had in Josephine’s office.”
Just fuck my life. Helen took the bottle. “We’re not lovers,” she insisted after a huge swallow.

“Oh, I have no doubt that he’s utter balls at courtship. Doesn’t change the fact that a lot of people argued with you at your own party, and you held your ground. Only Solas made you cry.

“What did he say to you, anyway?”

“Nothing worth repeating.”

“That bad? Was it, ‘your ears are the wrong shape?’”

Helen drank more rum.

“Who thinks to grab liquor during an evacuation, anyway?” she asked as she handed him the bottle back.

“The Chargers. Maker, that’s an effective merc group. If I didn’t have so much else going on, I’d ask Bull for a job.”

“Really?”

Hawke made a face and took a drink. “No, not really,” he said, wiping his beard with the back of his hand. “I don’t fancy taking orders. As much as I admire Bull, he’s no Tal-Vashoth. I killed the Arishok. If Par Vollen ever changed its hivemind about me, I’d be in chains with my lips sewn shut in no time.”

“He’d really do that to you? Even if you were one of his own men?”

Hawke gave her an almost pitying look. “Herald, they give up their babies at birth to have them raised by the collective. All emotional attachment is secondary to the dictates of the Qun.

“So, yes. Bull would do that to me. He might not want to, but if the order came down, he would.”

“I had no idea.”

“You have a Ben-Hassrath on your ground team,” said Hawke, rather sharply. “Didn’t anybody explain what that meant?”

“Not like that, no. I knew he was a spy for his own government, but I saw it as mostly Leliana’s problem, not mine.”

Hawke shook his head in disbelief. “That was fine when all you had to do was close the Breach, but you’re about to swim in much deeper waters, Herald. You need to know who all the sharks are.”

Helen gave him a puzzled look. “What do you mean?”

“What exactly do you think happened last night?”

“They all think I’m divinely chosen, which I’m not. And that I’ll continue the fight against Corypheus, which I will.”

“Well, yes, that’s all true, but what do you think that means for you?”

“That I can’t fucking leave.” Helen could not keep the bitterness out of her voice.
“Maker, you really don’t know,” Hawke marveled. “Herald, they’re going to ask you to be Inquisitor.”

Helen quit moving so abruptly that Hawke had to warn her, “No, no! Don’t stop walking!” Hawke’s arm around Helen’s shoulder was the only reason she kept moving forward.

“That’s ridiculous!” she hissed. “Three days ago, most of these people thought I was a foreign witch!”

“Oh, they still think you’re a foreign witch. Only now, you’re their foreign witch, at least until you do something they don’t like. Then they’ll turn on you again, which leads me back to my point about deeper waters.

“Varric tells me that you’ve been closing rifts and running Inquisition errands since the moment you woke up.”

“More or less.”

“Didn’t anybody ever sit you down and explain the world you’re being asked to save?”

“A bit. The advisors gave me an overview of Thedas right before I was sent out with my first ground team. Since then, I’ve sort of had to learn as I go. Honestly, the most helpful thing so far has been ‘Tale of the Champion.’”

Hawke gave a cynical bark of laughter. “‘Here, Herald, read some fiction! It’ll teach you everything you need to know!’ No wonder you keep stepping in it. You really don’t understand anything.”

“No, but you do,” Helen said, suddenly hopeful. “You should be the Inquisitor. I mean, you were their first choice, right?”


“Besides, it doesn’t matter now. You said it yourself. Corypheus didn’t come after me, he came after you. There’s a reason they didn’t sing to me last night.”

Helen lowered her head and watched her feet walk through the snow.

Hawke slid his arm to her upper back as if he were trying to help her stiffen her spine.

Helen remembered that he had lost his mother to a madman, defeated a Qunari invasion, been skewered by the Arishok, and been named Champion of Kirkwall, all within a fortnight. If anybody could relate to how overwhelmed she felt right now, it was Garrett Hawke.

She slipped her arm around Hawke’s waist and allowed herself to lean into him.
“I don’t belong here,” Helen said quietly. “I’m an atheist from another galaxy. How am I supposed to run a religious organization on a planet I barely understand?”

“For starters, stop calling Thedas ‘a planet.’”

“But Thedas is a planet.”
“Yes, I know, but nobody else talks like that. And since nobody can really relate to you, it’s your job now to relate to everyone else.”

Helen nodded morosely.

Hawke said, “You know, my father had a saying. ‘You can be right, or you can be happy.’

“I watched you get caught between Solas and Sera the other night. You could have deflected, or lied. You could have followed Varric’s advice.

“But you didn’t. You told the truth, or your version of it, and upset a lot of people, including yourself.”

Helen started to argue, but Hawke cut her off. “I’m not criticizing your decision. You deserve friends who know who you truly are. Good friends have your back despite the occasional disagreement. If they don’t, then they aren’t really your friends.

“I’m merely pointing out that you’re going to face a lot of decisions like that. Be right, or be happy. It’s rarely going to be both. Decide which is best and don’t look back.

“And for Maker’s sake, get paid. If you survive this, you’ll need resources of your own. Talk to Varric if you don’t know what to do with your money. He’s rich for a reason. He’ll set you right.”

Hawke’s practical advice made Helen feel more grounded. “I will. Thank you, Garrett,” she said.

Hawke pulled her a bit closer, speaking low into her ear.
“And, dearheart, beware moody mage men. Whatever is weighing down their tortured souls, it isn’t your happiness.”

Then he straightened up, and said, rather loudly, “Speaking of elves that sneer a lot, I’ll get word to Fenris that your little business venture will have to wait for a bit.”

He finally removed the arm that had been around her. “I’m going back to the fun people. Not that you aren’t fun, of course, but you know,” and he waved his hand around to indicate the general area as if that explained anything. “Anyway, come find us tonight if you need another drink or five.”

Then he left.

Helen looked over her shoulder to see where Hawke was going, curious to know where the “fun people” were grouped. She saw Cullen glaring at Hawke.

Hawke called out, “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Cullen. All I did was ply her with drink in the middle of the day in front of all of the faithful. Sweet Maker, you’re uptight!”

Cullen started to argue, but when he noticed Helen watching, he glanced away like he was embarrassed.
She looked ahead of her and kept moving forward.

Eventually, Solas rejoined her, looking a lot less serene.

Solas said nothing.

Helen said nothing.

**

Solas did not overhear what the Champion of Kirkwall whispered into Helen’s ear.

But he could guess. He certainly heard everything else.

His jealousy was uncalled for. He had no right to call himself her friend, much less offer her comfort. The Champion gave Helen good advice and a shoulder to lean on when she’d needed it.

Solas made his way back to Helen. They continued the rest of the day in silence. It was a relief to finally stop and set up camp.

He still kept an eye on Helen. Despite Hawke’s invitation to Helen to come have “a drink or five,” she worked late into the evening.

Cole found Solas near the edge of camp long after most of the survivors had gone to bed.

“How are you doing, Cole?”

“Roderick died. I’m helping other people now.”

“Take care to protect yourself, as well. There is much despair here.”

“I will.” He sat with Solas for a bit, then said, “You want to know how she’s doing.”

“Yes,” Solas admitted.

“Hungry, hurting, headache. Don’t cry, don’t bitch, don’t blame. They’re all watching. My people, my responsibility. Don’t look for him, don’t ask for help, he never did—

“Oh.” Cole listened to Helen for a moment longer, and added, “She’s very angry with you.”

“She has cause.”

“She thinks her ears are the wrong shape.”

Solas could not talk about this with Cole, not here and now, anyway. “You said she was hungry?” he asked.

“Her portion wasn’t enough, but she doesn’t want to ask for more than her fair share.”

“The Herald needs more nourishment than most, a fact everyone else has a habit of forgetting. Perhaps you could suggest to the cook to give her more at mealtimes.”

“I will,” Cole said, clearly happy at getting to help.

“It is probably best to keep yourself out of sight, at least until we reach Skyhold. It will be easier for others to accept you when they have food in their bellies and a roof over their heads.”
“All right.” Then he was gone.

Solas made his way to his tent and went to sleep. The Fade was troubled that night, as the traumas of the last few days made their way into the dreams of the survivors.

Solas cloaked himself in mist and wandered the dreams of the mages. The younger or less powerful ones were easy enough to soothe. You have done well, he told them. You are showing that mages are trusted allies. They needed the encouragement, and Pride was not always a sin.

Other mages did not need his help, but that did not stop him from observing where he saw fit.

Vivienne seemed bored by the Pride demon trying to interest her in a scene of the faithful kneeling to her, instead of to Helen.

Fiona had warded her dreams. The strength of her wards spoke of long experience. Solas felt his respect for the former Grand Enchanter rise.

Dorian was in an exquisitely appointed salon, perusing the bookshelves. He immediately sensed Solas’s presence. “Who’s here?” he demanded. Solas quickly slipped away.

Hawke dreamed he was bound in chains of red lyrium to a blond man with sharp features. They stood in the ruined Chantry courtyard while Kirkwall burned.

The blond man (who was actually a despair demon) was saying things like, “You brought red lyrium to the surface. You could have stopped me before I’d gone mad. Why didn’t you do something before? Look at all the damage you’ve caused.”

“Do shut up, Anders,” Hawke said, as he tried to pick the lock on the chains. He sounded resigned. Clearly, this demon was a frequent visitor.

Whatever inappropriate jealousy Solas had towards Hawke, the Champion had helped Helen today when Solas could not. He would return the favor.

He willed a key to drop at Hawke’s feet. The despairAnders hissed at Solas, but Hawke didn’t notice. He picked up the key and unlocked the chains.

Then he slipped a knife in between Anders’ ribs. “I told you,” he said, as the despair demon vanished with a screech. “Stop bringing me back here.”

The smoke and soot disappeared. Hawke sighed in relief. Then he looked at the key in his hand and put it in his pocket.

Another despair demon might find Hawke eventually, but this should give the man some temporary peace.

Solas awoke the next morning. He took his place next to Helen, and once again they led the masses northward.

It was the start of four very long days.

You’re not the only one who’s proud. Helen’s words back in Haven had rolled off Solas’ righteous anger like water on an oiled boot.

He should have taken heed. It had been a warning. For four days, they traveled the Frostbacks side by side in near silence.
Helen never spoke to him. Not once.

She spoke at him, certainly. When Fiona asked about using warming spells on the survivors’ clothing to prevent frostbite, Helen solicited Solas’ input. She scrupulously emphasized that Solas deserved all the credit for discovering the place they were headed. The few times he ventured to ask her anything (usually about the Mark or her injuries) she answered in a professional tone ("It’s fine/I’m fine, thank you.")

Commander Trevelyan treated him with absolute civility and respect and grew more distant with every step.

Finally, early on the fifth day, Solas sensed the outermost of his ancient wards.

“We are getting close,” he said to Helen.

She nodded. They continued on in their usual silence. Solas still had no idea how to fix what he had broken.

“How are your injuries?” he asked after an empty hour had passed.

“Fine, thank you.”

“And the Mark?”

“Fine, thank you.”

_Felsounathe’ asha._

On they hiked. When a mountain ridge as familiar to him as his own hands came into view, he said, “It should be just past this rise.”

They walked up the last incline, Solas slightly in the lead. He stopped to look at the modern incarnation of his fortress. Gone were the elegant crystalline spires and soaring archways. What stood now was a substantial, stonework castle.
But the footprint was remarkably similar. Solas’ architectural designs had spoken throughout the ages.

He heard Helen walk up next to him.

“Skyhold,” he said.

Helen said nothing, and Solas turned on her, annoyed that she could not even appreciate this moment for what it was.

His irritation vanished the moment he saw her face.

This woman from another galaxy, who had traveled the stars for most of her life, stared at Skyhold with absolute wonder.

“It’s a castle,” she breathed.

“It is a castle,” he affirmed.

“You said it was a ruin.”

“I said it was old.”

She smiled a little, almost involuntarily. “So you did,” she acknowledged.

When she glanced at him, there was the tiniest flicker of warmth in her eyes. “Thank you, Solas. You’ve saved all of our lives with this. I won’t forget.”

He shrugged modestly. “I am simply doing my part, Herald.”

She looked back at Skyhold. The little smile on her face slowly melted away.

“And I need to do mine.”

Helen didn’t say much after that, but at least her silence no longer felt actively hostile.

He told himself to be content with a tentative peace and polite distance. “He Who Hunts Alone” was not simply a moniker about his solitary nature. It was a reminder about collateral damage. For the burden of the People’s salvation rested on his shoulders, and the path ahead of him was filled with destruction.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to my betas for their guidance on this. They keep me on the straight and narrow.

A HUGE shoutout to ProcrastiKate for her two absolutely gorgeous renders of Helen
and Hawke. I know I say every time she gives us something that it's my new favorite, but honestly, the one of Helen and Hawke with the arms around each other is now my wallpaper.

For those of you who are "Good Omens" fans, I have to plug the new fic, "The Face of Fear" from my beta, Duinemerwen. Find it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/19838476/chapters/46976413

And finally, thank you to everyone who has read, commented, and left kudos. I am grateful to all of you for following Helen on her journey.
Chapter fifty-seven

Chapter Summary

Helen becomes Inquisitor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-seven

After moving into Skyhold, Solas requested a long list of published works about the Veil and the Fade. Closing the Breach had shown him that he had misjudged the abilities of modern mages. It warranted further study.

He also asked for plaster and pigment. Duly supplied, Solas established himself in the rotunda and threw himself into his work.

His work was not always what it appeared to be.

The ground floor of the rotunda was free from hiding places. Everyone could see him, but nobody really watched him.

Why would they? He spent his time reading books, studying shards, and staring at the walls. By all appearances, he was simply an elf and Fade scholar with a bit of an artistic bent.
How easily people forgot about his presence—and his excellent hearing.

Solas learned the advisors had postponed any mission planning for several days. Helen needed to rest and recover from her injuries, and Skyhold needed to be established as the Inquisition's headquarters.

He overheard Commander Rutherford and Leliana argue about where to house the soldiers and scouts. Leliana wanted them in Skyhold, while the Commander recommended tent barracks down in the valley.

"They'll be safer here," Leliana said.

"We don't have the room," argued Cullen.

"But once we clear the rubble—"

"We still won't have room," Cullen gently insisted. "The valley has space to train and expand. We're well placed here in Skyhold. We'll see any approaching threat long before it gets here.

"But don't house troops in the castle just to make them move out a month later. It's bad for morale."

"I suppose you're right," Leliana sighed. "So, what are your thoughts about recruiting?"

Solas quietly took note of the places the Inquisition would be recruiting.

Over the next few days, he also learned where the Inquisition planned to establish new supply lines and hire workers. He then contacted specific agents in those areas. Recruit people in your own name. Have them join the Inquisition according to their talents. Await further instruction.

Soon, Solas would have agents in Skyhold, none of whom would know they actually worked for him.

Just as importantly, his people would be embedded within the Inquisition's supply lines. Supply lines were a favorite target for infiltrators and spies. Contraband could be smuggled in or out. Shipping manifests often held clues to an organization's plans. Transports could be sabotaged or delayed. Solas could prevent, allow, or cause problems, depending on his needs.

However, one thing he could not do in Skyhold was recruit people directly. His rotunda was an excellent place to learn information, but a terrible place to have a private conversation.

His only surviving agent from Haven was Telina. After hearing nothing from her for a few days, he sought her out.

He found her leaving the kitchens one evening. She walked over as soon as she saw him, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry I haven't been by sooner, but I've been reassigned. We're short-staffed. Cook needs us all in the kitchens."

"It is no trouble, da'len. Things were bound to change after the events in Haven," he soothed, although it was, in fact, a great deal of trouble. "Do you happen to know who is attending to the Herald now?"

"Nobody."
Solas raised his eyebrows. "Nobody?"

"She said she could stand in line like everybody else, and there was no need to take anyone away from more important work."

"I see. Will you return to the Herald once staffing levels are back to normal?"

"Not that I’ve been told."

Solas covered his disappointment by handing her a copper. "If you ever hear anything else of interest that you wish to pass along, send me one cup of black tea. That will be our signal, and I will know to seek you out."

He bade her goodnight and headed back to his quarters. As he walked, he contemplated the irony of his situation. The more his influence grew, the farther Helen moved out of his reach.

Cole waited for him in his quarters.

"Good evening, Cole. It is good to see you."

"It's good to be seen," Cole smiled. The play on words was their private joke.

"How did you spend your time today, da'lin?"

He got undressed as Cole recounted his day. A young laundress, distraught over her missing necklace, accused another laundress of stealing it.

The necklace hadn't been stolen. It had only fallen off in the laundry. Cole moved the necklace, so it was easier to see, then arranged for the girls to meet in the laundry coincidentally.

"They found it at the same time. The girl apologized to her friend, and her friend forgave her. Now both of them are happy."

"That was well done, Cole. You did not simply return property; you mended a friendship."

"Thank you."

"And how is the Herald?" Solas no longer tried to pretend he did not need to know.

"She still sleeps a lot, but she’s not hungry anymore. Cook always remembers now, 'double portions for the Herald.'"

"I am grateful to you, Cole. She will need her strength for what lies ahead."

Cole nodded. "I hope she lets me stay."

As much Solas wanted to protect Cole from the multitude of dangers surrounding them, Cole wanted to help.

Solas gently smiled at his young friend and said, "I hope so, too."

**

Arriving at Skyhold sent Helen's advisors into something of a tizzy. The task of getting Skyhold up and running grew larger every day.
Helen herself couldn't do much. Her medical scan was a clusterfuck. It showed a BMI at 16.5% and an entire alphabet of vitamin deficiencies.

The scan also alerted her to an uptick of telomerase in her brain.

Helen worried that contact with Corypheus' orb had caused some kind of cancerous or precancerous cells to appear. Instead, she found neural stem cells and immature neurons in her hippocampus, cerebellum, and amygdala, areas of her brain associated with memory and motor function.

The neurons had not yet fully developed. That could take weeks, as axons and dendrites branched out to connect with the rest of Helen's nervous system.

Did new neural growth count as brain damage? Would she lose any memories or motor skills?

Unfortunately, the best person to ask was Solas.

Without mentioning the neural growth, she told her advisors that she needed to recover from her injuries and regain her weight. "Otherwise," she said, "I'll be of no use to anyone."

Nobody argued with her. She'd shared a tent with Josie, Leliana, and Cassandra on the way to Skyhold. They'd seen for themselves the extent of her injuries and how thin she'd become. They gave her a tiny room off the central courtyard as her temporary quarters.

For several days, she did little more than eat, sleep, and walk around Skyhold.

Meals consisted almost entirely of mutton and apples. Those were the only foods in abundance, at least until Skyhold started receiving shipments. Helen was grateful for every mouthful.

She slept a full eight or nine hours every night, and she took frequent naps during the day. Her dreams were odd, all saturated colors and hurried activity. Waking up felt like walking out of a movie theater unable to recall anything she'd just seen.

Even awake, she felt somewhat fractured, like she'd been dropped through someone else's looking glass.

She saw that Varric and Hawke had claimed a corner of the battlements for themselves. Sometimes she heard Blackwall yelling at trainees.

Vivienne walked around as if she were back at Court. Helen avoided her. She'd need her strength to parry the sharp tongue of Madame de Fer.

Helen didn't see Dorian at all. She wanted to, but he spent his days in the rotunda, an area Helen actively avoided.

She bumped into Bull one afternoon as she returned to her room for a post-lunch nap. He gave her a gentle hug and said, "You look like shit. We'll catch up later."

Two people she did see were Cassandra and Sera. Helen sat with Cassandra at breakfast and supper, and with Sera at lunch.

Cassandra did not do small talk. Sera did most of the talking for both of them. (Sera was currently waging a war of attrition against the cooks, and gave Helen daily updates.)

Either way, neither of them expected Helen to make conversation, which was good because talking
exhausted her.

After a few days, the kitchens made soap. Clean clothing on clean skin helped bring Helen back to herself. She wasn't fully functional yet, but she was able to spend more time walking around Skyhold.

Skyhold was an absolute marvel. It was never too cold or too hot and had running water on site. She liked to walk along the battlements and run her fingers over chisel marks in the stone.

What was capable of this sort of climate control? How did fruit grow in a courtyard with so little direct sunlight? How could a fortress this large, only a week's travel from Haven, get lost to history?

Unfortunately, the best person to ask was Solas.

A week after they arrived, Helen ran another medical scan. She'd regained most of a kilo, her BMI had ticked up to 16.9%, and her vitamin deficiencies had improved. She was not battle-ready by any means, but she was on the mend.

The neural growth continued. Helen gave herself a basic cognition test, but everything came back normal.

After breakfast, she tracked down Varric and Hawke on the battlements.

"Trevelyan!" Hawke cried. "What brings your lovely face to our little corner?"

"Finances. I need to get paid, but I don't know how much."

"Maker, it's about time," said Varric. "When are you going to talk to them about it?"

"I don't know. I guess they'll call a meeting in the next few days."

"Or, maybe they'll drag you off in shackles again," Hawke said brightly. "That does seem to be their preferred method of hiring people."

Varric turned his attention to Helen. "Let's say you survive. Once this shit is over with, what do you want to do with your life?"

"Well, I suppose I could still bust slavers with Fenris," Helen hedged.

"But?" Varric prompted.

"But, I'm not naive. I've had more injuries in the last several months than I did in 13 years of Alliance service. And the Mark isn't exactly good for my health. If I do survive, there are decent odds that my fighting days will be over."

"Fair enough. What else would you want to do? Farm? Travel? Business?"

Helen tried to picture herself doing something on Thedas besides combat and drew a blank.

"I honestly have no idea," she said.

"Well, let's keep you liquid for now."

They talked numbers. She learned about the cost of city living versus the country, and what sort of taxes to expect in various places. She took Varric up on his offer to invest her money.
Hawke and Varric also had very firm opinions on how much Helen should be getting paid.

"Don't let them pay you one copper less," Hawke said.

Varric agreed, adding, "The only two you need to convince are Nightingale and Ruffles. Curly's gonna squawk no matter what you ask for."

"Really? Why?" Helen asked.

"Because Ferelden farm boys are cheapskates."

"That's hardly fair," Hawke protested. "Technically, I'm a Ferelden farm boy."

"Technically, you're nobility, who are some of the cheapest bastards around."

Helen recognized the start of a lengthy bullshitting routine. She thanked them both and headed to lunch.

That afternoon, as she was coming out of the women's latrine, she saw all four of her advisors standing together in the courtyard.
Maybe it had been walking next to Solas for most of a week while being hyper-conscious about her ears. Perhaps she was used to being around her more diverse ground teams.

But whatever it was, Helen realized that all of the advisors were human, at least in the way that term was defined on Thedas.

It bothered her. It also bothered her that she’d never really noticed it until now. But before she could explore why it bothered her, Cassandra beckoned her over.

Cassandra led her up the stairs, commending Helen's leadership along the way.

*Guess it's time for that job* interview, Helen thought.

When they got to the top of the landing, she expected they would head to Josie's new office and talk. Instead, Cassandra stopped and said, "The Inquisition requires a leader: the one who has already been leading it."

Then Leliana held out a sword.

A crowd had gathered below. People watched her with anticipation on their faces.

*Are you shitting me?* She stared at the sword in Leliana's outstretched hands but made no move to take it.

"Normal people have job interviews," she said between her teeth.

Leliana looked her in the eye and said, "When were you ever normal?"

Helen exhaled in disgust and picked up the sword. It was so large and heavy that she had to engage her biotics for a moment until it was steady. The crowd gazed up at her, clearly expecting an inspirational speech.

Helen couldn't do "inspirational" right now, but she sure could do "loud."

"Corypheus told me that he's going to make himself a god! That I should beg for him to succeed!" she cried.

"But I didn't beg! I told him that nobody would ever worship him. *Then I buried his army!*"

The crowd seemed to like that quite a lot.

"He can beg his gods for mercy, FOR WE WILL SHOW HIM NONE!"

The crowd cheered even louder.

Helen was about to translate some Krogan battlecries when Cassandra hastily stepped in front of her.

Cassandra did a sort of callback with Josephine and Cullen that sounded suspiciously rehearsed. Cullen raised his sword, the crowd cheered, and that was that. Helen was Inquisitor.

As she and the advisors walked to the Grand Hall, Helen tried to suppress her annoyance at being blindsided. *They've been working non-stop while you've been resting.*

Once inside, Helen took a calming breath and said, "I appreciate the trust you're putting in me, truly I do. But please, don't put me on the spot like that again. I had no idea that was coming."
Josephine gently said, "We meant no disrespect, Inquisitor. The people had already chosen you in spirit. Now, they've chosen you in name."

"I know, and I appreciate your trust in me, but I honestly expected a private interview. I have legitimate concerns about being Inquisitor. What would you have done if I'd refused?"

Cullen frowned, but Leliana and Josephine took it in stride. Josie asked, "What concerns do you have?"

"Food, information, and salary," Helen said. "I've recovered somewhat but I can't fight for you like this. The Alliance would have grounded me months ago.

"The extra food Josie tried to secure for me did me no good when soldiers and scouts stole it," she said, pointing at Cullen and Leliana.

"Next is information. I don't understand Thedas," she said.

"On that, we can agree," Leliana remarked.

Helen gave her Spymaster a look and said, "Garrett Hawke gave me better insight into the Qunari than any of you. Vivienne taught me about Andraste. I know more about Atlathan and Kirkwall than I do Ferelden and Orlais.

"I don't know what I don't know, so tell me, preferably before I step on somebody else's toes."

"We can do that," Leliana said. "I'll order some histories and treatises for you to read. That should be a start."

Josephine added, "I will supply you with the family trees and heraldry of the players in Ferelden and Orlais. Many will visit Skyhold. They'll be more generous in their support if you demonstrate that you know who they are and can address their concerns."

"Thank you," Helen said. "Lastly, we need to discuss my pay."

"What did you have in mind?" Josie asked.

Helen then gave the amount that Hawke and Varric had recommended. All three advisors raise their eyebrows.

"That's, ah, quite the number, Inquisitor," Josie said. "Where did you come up with it?"

"Varric."

"Varric?" Cullen said suspiciously. "You just said you had no idea this was coming."

"Oh, I knew you'd ask me to be Inquisitor," Helen responded. "I didn't know you'd drag me in front of traumatized survivors without asking first."

The advisors looked at each other but said nothing.

Helen crossed her arms and leaned her weight on her back foot. "Can you meet my terms, or are we here to negotiate my compensation package?"

"We can meet them," Josephine said.

"We can?" Cullen sounded horrified.
"We can," Leliana replied, after giving Cullen a quelling glare. "But in exchange, Inquisitor, we expect a lot more from you than just closing rifts and clearing bandits.

"We're in the Grand Game now. You need to learn how to play."

"That's fair," said Helen. "Just remember that I have no concept of what the Grand Game is. Are we agreed, then?"

"Agreed," said Leliana.

"Agreed," Josie chimed in.

Cullen looked like he was eating a lemon, but managed to nod.

Helen turned the discussion into a status conference.

They didn't know where Corypheus kept his base of operations, or where the Wardens had gone.

In the red future Helen had witnessed, Empress Celene had been assassinated, and Corypheus had swept in with an army of demons. They wanted to prevent both.

They were receiving requests for aid all over Ferelden and parts of Orlais. The Inquisition could increase its influence and effectiveness by assisting others.

Cullen didn't say much, and what little he did say was delivered in a pissy tone.

Helen resented it until she noticed his hands trembling. She pulled back her bitchiness and said, "Here's what I want to do.

"Cullen, you and I need to watch the recording of the battle at Haven to classify the red Templar hostiles. I know you're pressed for time, but we can do it over supper. Hopefully, it won't take more than a couple of hours."

Before Cullen could disagree, Leliana said, "Use the new War Room. There are silencing enchantments in the stone."

Helen nodded. "That's a useful upgrade. I also want to debrief everyone tomorrow afternoon. I want the three of you, the ground team, Hawke, and Fiona there. Everyone needs to see and hear Corypheus speak.

"Sound good?"

"Agreed," said Leliana.

"As you say, Inquisitor," said Josephine.

"Fine," Cullen snapped. He turned on his heel and walked out.

Once he was gone, Helen asked, "When was the last time he ate?"

"Yesterday," Leliana replied.

"I'll speak to him tonight about his habits. Josie, please have the kitchens send plenty of food to the War Room."

Leliana left for the rotunda and Josie headed to her new office. Helen, meanwhile, stared at the
rubble for a few minutes as her new reality sank in.

She did not want to be the Inquisitor.

She had plenty of experience with command, certainly, but her experience had mostly been in the field. No matter the mission, Helen had always been following somebody else’s orders. *Bust those slavers. Recover that shipment. Infiltrate those mercenaries.*

Now she was the highest-ranking member of the Inquisition. She no longer had the luxury of pointing up the chain of command if something went wrong.

She did not want to be Inquisitor. But she had accepted the position anyway.

*You took responsibility. That means being responsible. Move out, Trevelyan.*

She walked out the main doors and into the sunshine.

**

Cole sat cross-legged in the grass and ran his hands over the grass. He liked it. The little, green blades tickled his palms.

He listened to Cassandra, Vivienne, and Solas argue about him.

Vivienne looked at Cole and saw every demon she’d ever encountered. Hard, harrowing, hurtful. She wanted Cole to leave.

Cassandra was suspicious, serious, seeking. She thought Cole was dangerous, and she was right. He was dangerous.

Solas understood Cole best. He wanted Cole to stay, but he worried for him, too. *You are precious and rare, Cole, and I do not want to see you come to harm.*

Cullen hunched over a nearby table, angry and afraid. He wanted to run a sword through Cole.

The Inquisitor came down the stairs. She was small on the outside, but inside she was bigger than the sky.

She was happy to see him. "Cole!" she said. "I'd wondered if you'd made it out of Haven. Were you with the survivors?"

"Yes," he said, still petting the top of the grass.

She noticed Solas, and her happiness flickered into sorrow and resignation. Solas felt the same. Their sorrows matched like two puzzle pieces broken apart.

"This thing is not a stray puppy you can make into a pet," Vivienne said. "It has no business being here."

"Wait, did you just call Cole a *thing*?" asked the Inquisitor.

Oh, Cole liked the Inquisitor *very* much.

She listened to the others argue about Cole. Curious, cautious, confused, the Inquisitor wanted to know more about him.
He walked over to the outdoor infirmary. She followed him, saying, "I'll see what Cole has to say for himself."

He showed her who he was and what he could do.

Her caution increased. "You're...feeling their pain?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Oh," she said. It confused her. "Why?"

"I can help the hurt." He showed her something simple. A soldier wanted water but lacked the strength to ask, so Cole brought her a water skin.

"She won't remember me," he said.

"Why not?" asked the Inquisitor.

"Most people forget me."

The Inquisitor gave him a good, long look. Her gaze wasn't hostile, but it wasn't friendly, either. She was sorting through information to make a decision about Cole. He caught flashes of pink skin, blue skin, three fingers, four eyes, sharp teeth.

He wanted to ask her about it, but the agony of a dying soldier was too much to ignore. "He wants mercy," Cole explained, and he pulled out his dagger.

The Inquisitor gently lifted the blanket covering the soldier. A leg wound had festered. The skin over most of his lower body was blistered, red, and patchy.

She touched the inside of the soldier's wrist for a few moments, then placed her hand on his blazing hot forehead. The soldier turned his head just slightly into her hand, a flicker of hope that it would end soon.

The Inquisitor looked around. "Owin?"

Owin walked over, giving Cole a confused look.

Cole liked Owin. He liked all of the medics. They helped people. But they never remembered him.

The Inquisitor pointed to the dying man, eyebrows raised in question.

Owin shook his head. "A minor stab wound in Haven. Had he come to us sooner, we could have cleaned it out, treated it properly. Unfortunately, by the time he came to us, he had blood poisoning. Now, all we can do is wait."

The Inquisitor sighed. *Pointless, preventable, my responsibility.* "All right, Cole. Give him mercy."

Cole slipped his dagger into the soldier's failing heart. The soldier sighed in relief and died.

Owin was relieved for the soldier. "Thank you, Your Worship," he said.

"Just 'Inquisitor' is fine. I'll check in on you later."

Cole stood up and told the Inquisitor he wanted to stay. She looked him over, still undecided.
"Will you walk with me? I have questions."

She led him up to the far side of the battlements and said, "I'm not sure what to make of you, Cole. We didn't have demons and spirits in my world."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. We just didn't. What kind of spirit are you?"

"Compassion."

"Isn't your demon Despair?"

"Yes."

"I have a hard time against Despair demons," she admitted.

"They feed on the hurt. Your sorrow is their strength."

She nodded. "Solas told me the same thing the first time I'd encountered them. They'd said awful things to me, and in my own tongue, too, which made it even worse."

"They don't really know your language. They only heard the shape of your sorrows and spoke them back to you. I hear them, too, but I use them to help."

He could feel her memory of that day. It was tangled up in much more recent grief.

"Helping, healing, you fought together to defeat the demons. He gave you a tooth to protect you."

The Inquisitor stopped in her tracks and stared at him. He could feel her sorrow bubble up, like a poison that needed to be leached.

"You gave it back, a gift inside a gift. Two wolves, one word, wrapped inside your world. The wisdom of the ages."

Now she was sad and upset. "You can see all of that?"

"Yes."

"Cole, that's private." She tried to draw her emotions back into herself. Solas did the same thing but was much better at it. The ragged edges of the Inquisitor's emotions stuck out everywhere.

Cole just needed to pull on the right thread.

"So much to show him. He would understand. Everything connected by ladders that twist around themselves. You wanted him to believe you."

"I did," she whispered.

Cole pulled on that thread a little more. "You could talk to him. He misses you."

Bitterness yanked the thread back. "Sometimes, people miss the things they throw away."

Then she stood up straight and started walking again. "I can't talk about Solas right now. I need to learn about you."

"All right," Cole said. He hadn't helped much, but at least he knew more about the weave of her
"Do you remember being in the Fade?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been on this side of the Veil?"

"I don't know. A while."

"Have you always looked like this or do you start as a baby?"

"Just like this. But I like babies very much. Their hurts are so simple to fix."

She smiled at that. Cole liked that he had made her smile.

"How did you cross over the Veil and stay intact?"

"I was needed."

"Needed for what?"

"Cole needed me."

"I thought you were Cole."

"I am, but I wasn't. I thought I was a ghost."

"I don't understand what that means."

As they wandered around Skyhold, Cole explained himself as best he could. The Inquisitor was confused about some things he told her. She really did not like that he could hear the words in her mind.

But she wasn't afraid of him. If anything, she was worried for him. It reminded him of Rhys.

"Cole, when you knocked on the gates of Haven, you were surrounded by dead Templars. Did you kill all of them yourself?"

"Some of them were already dead. I killed the rest."

"A skinny boy in leathers kills several heavily armored Templars with no help or injury," she stated.

"Yes."

"What are your weapons of choice?"

"Daggers."

She looked impressed. "Well, that would round out my ground team. Is that how you want to help? Combat? My medical corps could use your talents, too."

"I can do both. I can help in lots of ways."

She was quiet for a long while, as they walked toward the courtyard. Finally, she asked, "Will you be safe around me?"
"I don't know. Do you want to hurt me?"

"No. I worry that my despair would harm you. I have a lot of it, and I don't want you to put you at risk."

"I don't think you will."

"Here. This is my room. Come on in; there's one last thing I want to ask you."

She closed the door behind them and tapped her right wrist. An orange light wrapped around her forearm and hand.

"This is called an omnitool. It was standard technology in my world. I try not to use where most people might see it."

"It's very pretty," Cole said.

"Thank you. It allows me to scan things and learn about them. You know those twisting ladders you mentioned earlier?"

"Yes."

"I want to see what yours looks like. I've never met anybody from the Fade before. Well, that's not true, I have met a lot of demons, but nobody like you."

"Does it hurt?"

"No. See?"

A cone of light slid across her hand, and the omnitool made a happy little chirp.

"I won't lie, Cole. Some of what you do makes me extremely uncomfortable. But you seem like a good person, and we need all the help we can get, even unusual help. Maybe especially unusual help.

"As for the scan, this is just to satisfy my own curiosity. If you don't want to, I won't. I'll keep anything I learn private.

"Either way, I'd like you to stay with the Inquisition."

She was telling the truth. She was curious, nothing more, and would not hold it against him if he said no.

He held his hand out. "All right."

She made the pretty orange light sweep across his palm.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome."

She opened the door. He followed her out to the courtyard. "By the way, Vivienne called you 'it.' Solas called you 'he.' Do you have a preference?"

"I like 'he.'"
"Then I'm going to use 'he/him.'"

They walked to the bottom of the grand staircase. "The ground team is meeting tomorrow afternoon for a debriefing. You'll need to be there."

"I will be."

She began to walk up the stairs, her mind already on her next task. "Good. Welcome to the Inquisition, Cole."

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks, as always, to my betas, dreadlordcherrycake and Duinemerwen. They have been so supportive of this entire process and I cannot thank them enough. Many thanks, as well, to XenonFae for her willingness to act as my science beta. I tried to keep Helen's medical issues grounded in reality, but if there are any mistakes, they're my fault.

Sadly, we have no ProcrastiKate renders this time around. (I did manage to include a couple of my own screenshots, at least.)

And finally, thank you to everyone who has been reading, reviewing and leaving kudos. I am so grateful for all of you.
Chapter fifty-eight

Cullen’s “just in case” dose had been lost in Haven.

It had almost been a relief to no longer have it around, but for the rest of the Templars, it had been awful. Most of them had been without a dose since Haven. Tempers frayed. Just last evening, Cullen had to intervene when a young Templar Knight named Jeffries shoved a mage for “looking at me the wrong way.”

Then the first shipment of lyrium and replacement kits for the Templars had arrived just this morning. Not two hours later, Jeffries bounced into Cullen’s office, his pupils too small and his smile too bright. Not knowing any better, he put a replacement kit on Cullen’s desk.

“Shipment finally came in this morning,” said Jeffries. “Figured you’d want this. Sorry about last night, Commander.” Then he sauntered out Cullen’s door.

Cullen stared at the kit for what felt like hours, hating himself the entire time. Finally, he’d put it in the bottom of his desk, and joined the others for the Inquisitor's ceremony.

The Inquisitor gave a stirring speech to the crowd after she’d accepted the mantle. Personally, Cullen found her claims of belittling Corypheus to his face a bit far fetched, but, he’d liked her confidence.

But then she’d made demands of them! Food and information were reasonable enough, but that salary? Cullen was stunned that Leliana and Josephine had agreed to it!

And then, because her ground team apparently wasn’t nearly bizarre enough, she’d invited a damned demon to the Inquisition.

Thus his foul mood when he opened the door to the War Room.

The object of his frustration stood at one end of the War Table, which was covered in food and drink. The other end held writing supplies, paper, and notebooks.

“We have bread. And cheese,” she beamed, as she ladled stew from a tureen into a bowl. “There’s onions and carrots in the stew. Our first food shipment arrived this morning, and it makes me ridiculously happy. Have a seat.”

He grumpily sat down, and she put the bowl of stew in front of him.
“Eat,” she insisted.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I didn’t ask if you were hungry.”

“Are you *ordering* me to eat?”

She handed him a spoon.

While she served herself supper, Cullen reluctantly swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of stew. The third bite tasted quite good, and he quickly finished what had been placed in front of him.

“There’s plenty here. Help yourself,” she said.

Cullen ladled another serving into his bowl and pulled a hunk of bread off the loaf.

“Have the troops settled in all right?” she asked.

“Oh. Um, yes. There’s plenty of room in the valley. Is that Fairlyn cheddar?”

Fairlyn cheddar had always been his mother’s favorite. He cut off a corner of the sharp, yellow cheese and popped it into his mouth.

*All right, maybe I *was* hungry.*

“And how is recruitment coming along, Commander?”

In between bites of food, he updated her about troop levels, repairs on Skyhold, and the armory. Before he knew it, they had eaten everything.

Then she asked, “How many did we lose in Haven?”

He sighed, “I don’t know. We had to leave the dead where they fell. Our personnel records were lost, so I can’t do a roll call to account for all the missing.”

“I am so sorry, Commander.”

“So am I. We set up as best we could at Haven, but we could never prepare for an Archdemon, or whatever it was. With some warning, we might have...”

“We’d have still lost Haven,” she said. “You said it yourself. Haven’s no fortress.”

“No, it wasn’t. But Skyhold is. We’ll be prepared next time,” he promised.

“I don’t doubt it for a minute,” she stated.

They stacked the dirty dishes on one of the benches and retrieved the writing supplies.

Once they had returned to their seats, the Inquisitor said, “Before we get started, there’s something I want to talk to you about. Do you remember me telling you that lyrium was a pathogen?”

“Yes,” he said cautiously, not wanting to confess that he really had no idea what that meant.

“I never really had the chance to explain it properly. When you came out to the escape pod, I thought I was running out of time. But we’ve got time now if you want to hear what I’ve learned. You might find it useful.”
“Tell me,” he said.

She opened up the omnitool and began talking. He saw the scans of Solas’ and Vivienne’s staves, and what lyrium looked like at the smallest level. She explained in detail about pathogens. Some of it went over his head.

Most of it didn’t. Most of it made a horrifying sense. Lyrium was not a mineral or a metal. It was alive. The Inquisitor also suspected that it could make changes to a host body.

“What sort of changes?”

“I don’t really know. I’ve had no time to study it.”

“Who else knows?”

“Solas and Vivienne were with me when I made this discovery. They both urged me to keep it quiet, which I did until I told you.”

Then she pointed at the bench where their dirty dishes sat. “Speaking of not taking lyrium, you just ate enough for three people.

“I’m not criticizing because so did I. But I ate that much because I’m trying to regain all the weight I lost. You ate that much because it’s the first meal you’ve had since yesterday.”

“Is it?” Cullen couldn’t remember.

“I don’t know what you’re like when you take lyrium. I do know what you're like when you haven’t eaten. You tend to get a bit shirty with me.

“As the Commander of my armies and my resident expert on Templars, you will have to tell me things I don’t want to hear. Stop giving me reasons to ignore what you say.”

Damn. That was a fair point.

“I’ll, er, try to get back in the habit.”

“Three meals a day, every single day in a row,” she said crisply.

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

“Good. Shall we get started?”

The Inquisitor opened up the interface and warned, “I haven’t watched this yet, so I’ll be stopping a lot.”

“Wait,” Cullen said. “There’s something you need to know.”

“What’s that?” she looked at him with curiosity.

He took a deep breath and confessed, “I can’t remember the password you gave me.”

“Okay,” she looked at him a little confused. “And?”

“And it was my job to remember it. I failed.” He said it stoically with no excuses like he used to do with Meredith.
“Your job was to evacuate Haven,” The Inquisitor said quietly. “I gave you an unfamiliar word in a foreign language in the middle of absolute chaos. Of course, you forgot. You didn’t ‘fail’ anything.”

He blinked at her. She was letting him off the hook for this?

“For the record, the password is ‘Trafalgar.’”

“‘Trafalgar!’” he cried. “Maker, that’s right. ‘Trafalgar.’ It’s been bothering me for days.”

“We can change it to something easier for you to remember.”

“Er,” he stammered. Giving it to him at the last minute was one thing, but surely there were people better qualified. “You still want it to go to me?”

“Unless you don’t want it. I mean, it’s fine if you don’t. I know you have enough on your plate as it is.

“But if you do, I can show you how to use it while I’m here at Skyhold. Then it won’t be such a mystery after I’m gone. All I ask is that, when the time comes, you use it for everyone’s benefit.”

“Right, I can do that but...why me?”

She paused, and he saw everything she carried behind her dark, solemn eyes. Finally, she said, “Because actions speak louder than words.”

“‘Honnleith,’” he said. “Make the password, ‘Honnleith.’”

“What’s ‘Honnleith’?” she asked as she tapped on the omnitool.

“Where I grew up.”

She nodded. “Are you right-handed or left-handed?”

“Right-handed.”

She scooted her chair down. “Here. Sit on my left. I’ll show you how to use the interface.”

She showed him the symbols at the bottom of the screen. Reverse, pause/play, forward, search. It was rather intuitive once she’d explained it.
“This is so bizarre,” he said after touching it a few times and having the interface respond. “It doesn’t feel like anything, but it also doesn’t feel like nothing.”

“Your brain expects a tactile sensation, so sometimes it tries to supply what’s missing. You’ll get used to it.”

Then together, they watched the fall of Haven.

The recording started with her opening the doors to leave the Chantry. Cullen heard himself in the background shouting orders. He watched her jump onto the roof of the Chantry and look out over the burning ruins of Haven.
“Where you’re standing is exactly where that dragon landed right before it lit all of Haven on fire,” he said.

“Really?”

He nodded. “I was helping a couple of Chantry sisters get to safety. We had to hide behind that wall right there.” He pointed to the retaining wall where they’d cowered.

Then the recording showed Red Templars approaching the Chantry, and he focused on the task at hand.

They watched her fight through Haven, pausing often to identify the sorts of Red Templars she’d encountered.

Cullen offered what advice he could. The Red Templar guards, foot soldiers, and archers were basically just Templars. They were stronger than normal, but still visibly people.

The others, though—they’d become monsters. Cullen and the Inquisitor labeled them “Horrors,” “Shadows,” and “Knights.”

Cullen tried very hard not to think about the fact that they were once brothers and sisters of the Order.

It helped that the Inquisitor was very matter-of-fact about it all. As she’d ruthlessly mowed through the enemy, she’d consistently reported her findings to Cullen. She’d even had the presence of mind to scan some of the Red Templar bodies, saying,

“Get the results to the medics and Adan. Maybe they can find something useful.”

“Shit. I’d completely forgotten I’d taken those scans,” she said, writing something down on the paper next to her. “I’ll have to take a look before the debrief.”

He watched her pay her respects to one of the men sent to load the trebuchet. Seeing one of his men down caused a pang of guilt and pride that Cullen knew he would experience far too often before the war ended.

“Thank you, Inquisitor,” he said heavily.

“Least I could do,” she murmured.

Her time in the trebuchet yard made for tense viewing. She’d become less and less composed as the fighting continued with no seeming end in sight. Yet even as she’d turned the trebuchet, she’d continued to talk to him.

After one particularly harrowing encounter, she’d said,

“God, Cullen, I hope you’re making progress. I don’t know how many more of these fights I can win.”

Then he heard crunching, and suddenly she was on the other side of the yard. She’d turned around and laid eyes on a giant red thing, twice as tall as any man.

Cullen poked a finger to stop the playback. He stared at the red giant. A very quiet, very vulgar word escaped his lips.

The Inquisitor nodded. “Yeah, it’s pretty much a shitshow from here on out.”
They decided to call it a “Behemoth,” given its size. He watched the Inquisitor sustain one serious injury after another as she’d whittled down the numbers until she could take on the Behemoth alone.

But when it was over, as soon as she’d caught her breath, she’d gone right back to talking to him.

“Cullen, something is pulling the red lyrium beneath the surface.”

“Maker, what a nightmare,” he muttered, as she skipped to Corypheus’ arrival.

He listened to her belittle Corypheus to his face, scoff at his claim to godhood, and mock his “little Army of the Damned.” She giggled-- giggled!--at her own impertinence.

He gaped at her. “When you spoke to the crowd this afternoon, I thought you were exaggerating!”

“Nope!” Then she pointed to the recording and said, “Oooo, looklooklook! There’s your arrow! Watch his face when I kick the trigger!”

As she watched herself flee, the Inquisitor started calling out, “Run, Helen! Ruuuuuun!” She cheered herself crashing into the mining tunnel, and he found himself laughing along with her.

“There’s something very wrong with you,” he teased.

“You just now figured this out?” she grinned.

She forwarded through most of the mining tunnel until a rift opened up in front of her.

Four despair demons had dropped out of it. Her left hand raised up and flashed, and the despair demons vanished.

“How did you do that?” he asked.

She shook her head once, all traces of her earlier humor gone. “I don’t know. I’d never done it before, and I’d honestly forgotten about it until just now.”

“Oh. You should talk to Solas about that, don’t you think?”

“Probably.”

He watched her pause at the exit.

“Don’t let them burn my body, Cullen. Bury it, instead. Cassandra knows.”

She sped up the video of her struggling through the snow until she got to the mountain pass. Cullen saw himself and Cassandra running towards her as she’d fallen to her knees.

Cullen had reached her first. The view became a close-up of his pauldrons as she’d half-collapsed onto him.

“Herald! Stay with me!” he’d shouted.

“No, thank you,” she’d politely replied. Then the view got knocked around because she’d passed out and Cullen had to keep her from falling over into the snow.

The Inquisitor shook her head ruefully as she turned off the omnitool. “Well, at least my manners were still intact.”
“Why did you want us to bury your body?” he asked.

“To prevent the eezo from becoming airborne. I’d spoken to Cassandra about it in the event that I died.

“Of course, I didn’t die, in large part because of you.” She folded her hands on the table and looked him straight in the eye.

“You coordinated a last-minute defense of an unfortified position. You led the evacuation of a civilian population. Your advice and supplies kept me alive, and then you carried me all the way down a mountain to get me to safety.

“Hundreds of people owe their lives to you, including me.

“So thank you, Commander. If nobody has told you yet, you’re very good at your job.”

“I, ah,” Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed at how gratifying her praise felt. “I take back everything I said about how much we’re paying you.”

She laughed, picked up a notebook that sat with the rest of the writing supplies and handed it to him.

“I assume you lost your possessions in Haven, so on my way here this evening, I stopped by Josie’s desk and asked for another journal for you. It’s just a notebook, but it should do for now.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I really need to finish preparing for the debrief.”

“Of course. And, er, thank you.”

He stood up, said goodnight, and walked to the door.

He glanced back at her as he left the War Room. She was bent over the War Table, arranging papers in front of her. He made sure the door closed quietly behind him.

Later that night, he sat at his desk and opened the new journal.

At first, he thought the Inquisitor had given him a book by accident. Then he realized that she’d used the first dozen pages to reprint Newton’s laws, Newton’s “cannonball” thought experiment and a few pages of equations.

At the bottom of the last page, she’d written in her clumsy handwriting, “Sorry about the lack of trebuchets. Have some equations instead. Sincerely, H.T.”

He smiled, almost involuntarily.

Then he dipped his quill into his ink and wrote the date at the top of the page. He chronicled everything that had happened since closing the Breach.

Cullen wasn’t Varric. He didn’t write to move people’s emotions. This was a simple accounting, so that later he could see in his own handwriting that yes, these impossible things really happened.

After he had finished his statement of facts, he wrote,

“Trevelyan mentioned in passing that she doesn’t know what I’m like when I take lyrium. It seems absurd that she’s right, that she’s never seen me using the one thing that’s almost constantly on my mind.
“Greagoir wanted me to believe in the Order. Meredith wanted me to believe in Meredith.

“I think Trevelyan wants me to believe in myself. I don’t, of course. How could I?

“But she seems to. And, for now, maybe that’s enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to dreadlordcherrycake and duinemerwen for their help. They
gave me very useful feedback on this chapter, which had turned into a dumpster fire at
some point.

UPDATE: ProcrastiKate has given us a render!!! We are so blessed to have her talents
here.

And finally, thank you to everyone for reading, reviewing, and kudos! I really
appreciate how supportive everyone has been for Helen and her journey.
Chapter fifty-nine

Chapter Summary

Helen learns something she didn't know before. Dorian finds a sympathetic ear or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter fifty-nine

After Cullen left, Helen worked for a few more hours in the War Room, losing herself in the familiarity of preparing a mission debrief.

She categorized the Red Templars, and then she cross-referenced them with the Venatori scans she’d done in Redcliffe. The differences between the Venatori and the Red Templars were quite distinct.

She really needed Dorian to explain Venatori tactics to her. It was her own fault, of course, that she’d been avoiding the rotunda.

As she finished up, the omnitool pinged that it had compiled Cole’s DNA. She yawned and stretched, and opened up the report.

Anomalies found with this subject.

Elevated levels of telomerase.

Elevated levels of repair proteins (click here for details, infra.)

Helen scrolled through the summary with a shaking hand.

Cole’s DNA was fully human, but he was unrelated to anyone in the Initiative. She supposed that made sense, to the extent anything made sense about a spirit boy in corporeal form.

In every other way, however, his DNA profile looked a hell of a lot like Solas.

“You should not have come here, cousin."

The Revenant’s words in the Fallow Mire came back to her, as did all those conversations where Solas had talked about the Fade with such longing, almost as if he were…

“Homesick,” she whispered, covering her mouth. “Oh my god.” His ability to navigate the Fade, his insistence that spirits were people, his name, suddenly it made so much sense!

Didn’t it?

“I am not human! I am an elf!” Solas’ furious words came back to her.

Helen’s eyes flicked back and forth as her brain followed the thought towards its logical conclusion.
He was fluent in ancient elvish. He “studied ancient ruins,” and had a deep, detailed knowledge of the Elvhenan. He alone had recognized Corypheus’ orb as an elven artifact.

He waxed nostalgic about Arlathan, and a time when the Fade was everywhere. She’d once asked him if he had any family, and he’d replied, “No. Not for many years now.”

*How old is Solas? Did I ever ask him?*

No. She hadn’t. She *had* once asked him how old he’d been when he came into his magic. He responded that his people didn’t keep track of birthdays. After that, some part of her had just assumed he was in his forties.

Both Solas and Dalish had told her the ancient elves had been immortal, but Helen hadn’t taken it literally. She’d figured it was just a legend or a myth. Immortality wasn’t possible.

*Just like the Mark wasn’t possible. Just like time-travel wasn’t possible.*

“Holy fuck,” she breathed. Helen stared at the walls as the weight of new information shifted her perspective. The longer she sat with it, the more Solas seemed to come into focus.

It explained his fine manners when he bothered to use them. It also explained his ability to speak multiple languages, and his keen grasp of politics. He was a mage who knew swordplay. He painted *frescoes*, for fuck’s sake.

All in all, it was an odd skill set for a hermit still in his forties. But for an immortal...

Almost against her will, Helen recast their personal history in the light of her new understanding. Was this why that Revenant had called her Solas’ “pet”? Is *that* how Solas saw her? How many lovers did a man his age--

*Stop it. This isn’t about you.*

Helen shoved an old tangle of squirming insecurities back down into the dark recesses of her soul and focused on the problem at hand.

Was Solas a security risk or not?

He wasn’t the only member of the Inquisition with a Very Big Secret. Helen would never tell anyone about the connection between Fiona and Alistair, not even Fiona herself. At best, it would cause tremendous personal pain for the parties involved. At worst, it could topple a stable government.

Then there was Blackwall. Discussing him with Leliana was only logical. The Wardens were actively working with the enemy. Besides, recruiting Blackwall had been Leliana’s idea in the first place.

Should Helen tell Leliana about Solas?

Maybe. Maybe not. Unlike the Wardens, the ancient elves had not aligned themselves with Corypheus.

And, unlike Blackwall, Solas wasn’t really lying about his identity. He *wasn’t* Dalish. He *wasn’t* a city elf. He *was* an apostate. He simply allowed people to draw their own conclusions, something Helen had once done all the time in her line of work.
On the other hand, Solas clearly didn’t want this known. Even his future counterpart in Redcliffe had said nothing about it.

How would he react if he found out she knew? Would he flee? They couldn’t afford to lose him. His considerable martial skills aside, he was the Inquisition’s best and only expert on the Fade.

There was also the Mark and the slow, chronic damage it was doing to Helen. Only Solas knew how to heal it. If she drove him away, she’d be fucked.

Granted, she was probably fucked anyway, given that Thedas kept trying to kill her at every turn. But she’d be fucked a lot faster if Solas bailed.

Tell the advisors? Only tell Leliana? Talk to Solas alone? Keep her mouth shut?

Helen turned the problem over and over but couldn’t find an easy answer. The Inquisition didn’t have a Uniform Code of Military Justice she could search with terms like, “immortality, disclosure requirements.”

After a while, she pressed the heels of her hands into her burning eyes. She reminded herself that she was still recovering, and could take more than an hour alone in the War Room to process everything she’d just learned.

She tidied up, placed the supper dishes outside the door, and left. Her thoughts preoccupied her until she got to her temporary quarters, and found Cole sitting on her cot next to a stack of new clothes.

“Cole, what are you doing in my room?” she demanded.

“I didn’t know you’d learn so much,” he said meekly.

Shit. “Neither did I,” she sighed, closing the door behind her. “Bad habit, I’m afraid.”

She stepped over to the cot and picked up the note that lay on top of the pile of clothing. It read:

Inquisitor,

Josephine and I have ordered other sets of protective clothing for you, but for now, these should suffice. Please wear these as long as you are in Skyhold. They are for your safety.

New boots under the cot,

Leliana

The two outfits (leather leggings, reinforced waistcoats) were more light armor than clothing. Even the shirts were lined with light quilting.

“She worries about your safety,” Cole explained. “Sinister, sneaking, the blade under a smile. The biggest threat is the one you never see.”

Helen nodded, then gave Cole her best Commander Trevelyan stern-face.

“Look, Cole. Coming into people’s rooms without permission is rude. Lots of people would find it much worse than that.

“If you need something, I’m happy to talk, but from now on, knock on my door like everyone else. All right?”
“All right.”

“Good. Did you want to see your scan?”

Cole nodded. Helen moved the clothing, sat down next to Cole, and pulled up his data.

“It says here your DNA is human. *Homo sapiens sapiens*. That was my people’s formal term for ‘human.’”

“But I’m not human. I’m a spirit.”

“I know, but the omnitool can only see your biology. It says that you have human DNA, that all of your cells regenerate, and that you aren’t descended from the Initiative.”

“Who are the Initiative?” he asked.

“Oh. That’s right. You haven’t heard all this yet. Um, the Initiative was the group of people that traveled to...you know what? It’ll be easier to just show you.”

She figured she would give Cole the quick version she gave everyone else when she discussed her past. Instead, they spent a good thirty minutes mostly talking about her parents.

Cole didn’t really ask questions as much as he made comments that were both uncanny and comforting. “Your mother liked machines.” Or, “Your father used to sing in the kitchen. You liked his voice.”

Each little comment sent Helen into memories of a much happier time in her life. She wept as she told Cole about their farm, her mother’s kindness, or her father’s terrible jokes.

“They loved you very much.”

“I know,” Helen said, sniffling.

“You should talk about them more,” he declared.

She wiped her eyes. “Honestly? You’re the first person that’s ever asked about them, and not just here on Thedas. Nobody back home asked about them, either. Not after they died, anyway.

“But thank you for listening. It helps.”

“I’m glad.”

Helen looked at him curiously. “Are you going to tell Solas what I learned?”

“No. But you should.”

Helen could only nod. She bid Cole goodnight and told him she would see him at the debrief.

A few minutes later, Helen blew out the lamps and crawled into bed. As she drifted off, she remembered her earlier insight into how all of the advisors were human.

*If it bothers me, she wondered, how much does it bother Solas?*

**

Dear Maevaris,
I suppose by now you’ve heard about Haven.

Ignore whatever they’re saying back home. Here is the awful truth. The Elder One that Alexius was following? He calls himself ‘Corypheus,’ and he claims to be one of the Magisters Sidereal. He’s darkspawn, and he has an army of Templars infected with red lyrium.

I am utterly serious. I wish I weren’t, but there it is.

We’ve relocated to Skyhold, a castle here in the middle of freezing nowhere. The castle itself isn’t much. It was in literal ruins when we got here. But the magic here, Maevie! It’s older and deeper than anything I’ve ever felt, you must come when you get the chance.

I’ve gotten to know the Inquisitor a bit. She really is from another world, but I can’t do the story justice. If you come to Skyhold, you can talk to her about it. If not, I’m sure Varric will write a book.

But even though she’s from another world, she’s the least exotic person I’ve ever met. She’s a farm girl and a soldier, and honestly? It shows. She’s going to be a blazing disaster at the Game, and probably doesn’t give two shits about it.

 Needless to say, she’s getting along swimmingly with Garrett Hawke.

Did I just shamelessly namedrop the Champion of Kirkwall? Oh dear, it looks like I did. How crass of me.

Speaking of Hawke, he is not quite as dashing in person as he is in Varric's book. He’s short, extremely hairy, and he never flirts. He can hold his liquor, at least. That much is true.

Dorian kept writing, keeping his tone gossipy and light when what he actually wanted was to pour out his sorrows.

Leliana had made him responsible for Alexius during the evacuation. Alexius stumbled his way to Skyhold, never once looking up, never responding to any of Dorian’s questions or comments. It was like taking care of an invalid. Dorian had to literally put food in Alexius’ hands to get him to eat.

All in all, it was a wretched trip.

Helen was of no help. She was up at the front of the procession with the rest of “the adults,” as Dorian now thought of them.

Worse, all the fun people that Dorian would have gravitated towards had he not otherwise been occupied held a nightly party around their own campfire. He understood why he couldn’t join them, but understanding didn’t stop the jealousy.

The only times it felt tolerable was when Varric walked with him for a bit during the day, and when Bull offered him booze at night.

Varric never talked about Haven, or Maevaris or Tevinter. He only talked about Kirkwall. It took Dorian a day or two to realize that Varric was deliberately steering clear of any topics that might make for awkward conversation in Alexius’ presence.

“You know, Varric,” he said, “I went to Kirkwall once.”

“Yeah?” Varric’s eyes brightened.
“Bit of a shithole.”

“Yeah,” Varric sighed.

Bull, of course, had none of Varric’s tact. The first time he stopped by, Dorian was sitting outside his tent in front of his pathetic little bonfire trying to stay warm. Alexius sat nearby, his forehead on his knees.

“Hey, ‘Vint,” Bull said, squatting down on the balls of his feet. He handed a bottle of something strong-smelling to Dorian. “Drink?”

“Maker, yes.” Dorian took a swallow and nearly spit it back out. It was the strongest, worst-tasting rum he’d ever had. He swore he could feel it cauterizing his insides on the way down.

But he wasn’t going to show any weakness in front of a Qunari, especially not this Qunari. He powered it down and handed the bottle back.

Bull glanced over at Alexius and said, rather pointedly, “Must grind your gristle the ‘Elder One’ is some crazy ‘Vint asshole, huh?”

Dorian almost hissed, “Not here!” Was Bull just rubbing salt in Alexius’ wounds?

On the other hand, maybe this is what it would take to get Alexius to snap out of it.

“No,” Dorian admitted. “I'm not thrilled to discover we should take those old legends at face value.”

“Guess he thinks the modern Imperium is a real letdown, too.”

“Why wouldn't he? Tevinter once covered all of Thedas, its glory only matched by its depravity. It'd be like Koslun showing up and learning the Qunari didn't conquer the world after all.”

Bull scratched his beard. “Hmm, yeah. Priesthood's been trying to explain that one for centuries.”

He tapped his long, thick fingers over his mouth as if lost in thought.

Dorian realized he was staring at Bull’s hands and lips and looked away before he got caught.

“She’s,” Bull said, breaking the silence, “I should get back before Sera loses any more of the money she owes me. And Blackwall. And Varric and Hawke. Nightcap?” he offered the bottle again to Dorian.

“Thank you, but no.” Dorian was already feeling the effects of the one drink he’d had.

“See ya, ‘Vint.” Bull stood up and left, taking all of the heat with him.

It was like that for the entire journey. Varric gave a little polite chit-chat during the day. Bull showed up with horrible rum and pointed insults at night.

The rest was hours and hours and hours of Alexius shambling along like a corpse who’d forgotten to die.

Finally, they’d arrived at Skyhold. Alexius had been taken to the dungeons, which was both a relief and a heartache.

After that, Dorian had nothing to do. He felt very alone among all of these Southerners. He even missed Bull’s insults.
But if there was one thing Maevaris Tellani would not tolerate, it was self-pity. Dorian kept his whining to himself. He finished the letter, took it to the Rookery, and sent it on its way.

Then he returned to his corner of the library. He was perusing the new selection of books when Helen finally made an appearance.

Logically, he knew that Helen had not been purposely avoiding him, but logic only gets you so far when you’re lonely and bored. He was going to say something cutting but then he got a good look at her outfit.
“What the deuce are you wearing?” he said before he could help himself.

Helen was clad head to toe in black leather. “Do you like it?” she asked, looking down at herself.

He gave her a skeptical once-over. “If you’re dressing for a knife fight and you want the shiniest outfit available, it’s perfect.”

“Pretty much. It’s Leliana’s idea, actually. She wants to make sure that nobody can slip a blade between my ribs while I’m in Skyhold.”

Dorian managed to not roll his eyes before he turned back to the bookshelf. “Well. As invigorating as this topic is, I have actual work to do. Not all of us can laze around in bed day after day.”

Actually, he had no work to do. It occurred to him a bit late that Helen probably knew that, now that she was running the place.

“No worries,” she said. “I was about to go over the footage from Redcliffe. I thought you’d be the best person to help categorize the Venatori hostiles, but I can see you’re busy. I think Vivienne is available. I’ll ask her.”

She turned to leave.

“Oh, fine! I’ll help. But you’re still on my shit list,” Dorian said, half-annoyed, half-grateful that she’d called his bluff.

Helen beamed at him and as they walked down the stairs. “Will it help if I say you inspired the color scheme for this outfit?”
“No. It shan’t. You’re terribly dull and I hate you.”

Helen chuckled, but her mirth cooled as they reached the first floor.

Solas stood on the opposite side of the rotunda, staring at the wall like it held all the secrets of the Fade. His too-still posture made it clear that he was aware of their presence.

After they left the rotunda, Helen quietly exhaled. Then she put on a placid face and strode through the Grand Hall. Dorian followed her all the way to the War Room.

He had not been here before. An enormous slab table sat in the middle of the room. As promised, coffee and an assortment of sweets sat at one end of it. They helped themselves and sat down.

Helen took a sip of her coffee and said, “Tell me what you’ve been up to while I’ve been out of commission.”

“Oh, the usual. Acting as a jailer for my former mentor. Browsing your atrocious library. Listening to Southerners call me ‘that ‘Vint magister bastard’ behind my back.’

The airy, sarcastic tone he’d been aiming for came out instead as bitter resentment. Helen put her coffee cup back on the table and did that thing she sometimes did, where she seemed to look right into him.

“Explain,” she said quietly. It was both command and entreaty.

Dorian intended to complain about how Southerners kept calling him a “magister,” and didn’t seem to understand that he was on their side. And how bored he was with nothing to do in Skyhold. In other words, he intended to voice complaints about external problems.

Within moments of opening his mouth, however, he found himself talking about Alexius and his miserable trip to Skyhold.

“I don’t mean to suggest he should be free,” he said after his untouched coffee had gone cold. “He has nobody to blame but himself. I know that.

“But knowing it doesn’t make it easier to witness. Alexius rescued me, you know. Saved me from the streets, from my own excesses. He found me at my lowest. Instead of writing me off, he saw my potential.

“Alexius gave me a purpose beyond drinking myself into an early grave. Make no mistake, I wouldn’t be here without him.”

Helen reached across the table and gave his hand a quick squeeze.

Dorian sat up straight, and said, “Enough of my whinging. Did you really need me to help you with something or was this just an excuse to bask in my glory?”

“Both, obviously,” she grinned.

Together, they watched their little jaunt into the future at Redcliffe. It was just as awful as he remembered.

They identified eight or nine types of Venatori. Every atrocity they labeled made him a little angrier.

“You’re fuming,” she said after a while.
“No wonder people whisper behind my back! Just look at my fellow Tevene,” he said, flicking his hand towards the omnitool’s display.

“In Tevinter, they say the tales of magisters starting the Blight are just that: tales. But here we are. One of those very magisters. A darkspawn.”

“Tales?” she asked. “What does Tevinter say?”

“That the darkspawn were always there; and the magisters and the Blight aren’t even related. Hardly a surprise. No one wants to admit they shit the bed.

“But no. It was us, all along. We destroyed the world.”

She frowned at him. “Not ‘we,’ Dorian. Them. You didn’t do anything.”

Dorian would not deny he felt a tiny bit of relief that she was being so sensible about it, but he still felt compelled to argue, “Right, except I have idiot countrymen who would happily follow Corypheus if it meant a return to the good old days.”

“Perhaps you should find an organization willing and able to stop him,” she said dryly. “You could lend your talents and put the rest of your countrymen to shame.

“You could even become famous along the way. Dashing, talented, and handsome Dorian Pavus, who rebelled in the north so he could save the south.”

“You forgot ‘well-dressed,’” he said, pretending to mull the matter over. “And you do have a point. I am, after all, a man of many talents.”

“And I appreciate you not burdening yourself with false modesty. It saves us so much time.”

They grinned at each other, and Dorian found himself grateful for Helen’s easy humor.

But then she sobered and asked, “Are you going to speak with Alexius?”

“Maker, no. He clearly has nothing to say to me.”

“Josephine told me this morning that once Skyhold is ‘more presentable,’ I’ll have to decide Alexius’ fate. And not just him—apparently that will be expected of me for other high-ranking or unusual enemies we capture.”

“Better you than me. That sounds like an absolutely thankless task. You do realize that, don’t you? That nobody is going to thank you?”

She gave him a funny, almost wounded, look. “That’s not why I’m doing this.”

Dorian suddenly felt foolish for having asked the question and decided to cover it up with a little extra charm. “I knew there was something clever about you,” he grinned.

She smiled back but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I need to do some things before the debrief. Thank you for your help, Dorian. See you this afternoon.”

“Right. See you then.” Dorian stood, gave her a carefree wave, and left.
Right, so, it’s been awhile. I won’t bore you with all the gory details because AO3 frowns on that sort of disclosure. Suffice it to say, Helen & Co had to sit in the back for awhile.

Some shoutouts are in order here. Dreadlordcherrycake kept the Cole conversation in Cole’s wheelhouse.

Duinemerwen kept the Dorian section from going off the rails.

Also, for ProcrastiKate fans, she did a marvelous render for the last chapter (58) that I added a few weeks back. If you haven’t seen it yet, go feast your eyes. Unfortunately, we don’t have a render for this chapter. I did include a single, lowly screenshot.
Chapter sixty

Chapter Summary

Solas goes to the debrief, and is asked to stay after class.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter sixty

Solas arrived in the War Room shortly before the appointed time.

Almost everybody was already seated around the table. Solas sat next to Fiona, who nodded at him. Then she turned her attention back to Hawke and Varric who were, as usual, putting on a show for everyone else. Cole sat next to Varric and listened with wide, wide eyes.

“So then, after all that, Hawke goes back to the madam and asks for ‘The Bad Boy Special.’”

Cullen threw his head back and laughed, clearly getting a reference that nobody else in the room yet understood. “How have I never heard this before?” he guffawed.

“Because it’s not a story worth telling, Varric,” Hawke protested. “And in my defense, I was young and single and easily led astray!”

“Shut up, you two, you’re ruining the flow. Anyway, Hawke coughs up—how much did you pay again?”

They never got to hear, because Helen entered the room carrying a stack of papers.

“All right, everyone, settle down, please,” she said as she walked to the head of the table.

Spirits save him but it was hard to see her, looking healthier than she had in weeks and wearing black leather that hugged her thighs like a second skin.

Harder still was how her eyes slid over him without catching as she took a quick headcount. He received the same professional courtesy as everyone else—no more, no less.

Once she was satisfied that everyone was in attendance, she began to talk.

“All of you know by now that Corypheus was responsible for the Conclave disaster. And, of course, we all witnessed his attack on Haven.

“What most of you don’t know is that Corypheus has likely been working to consolidate his power for the better part of a decade.”

Solas felt his heart skip a beat. A decade? That couldn’t be right.

“Varric? Hawke?” Helen said. “I’d like you to tell everyone about your first encounter with
Solas listened to how Hawke had been coerced into freeing Corypheus from a Grey Warden prison in the Vinmarks. As soon as the seals had been broken, Hawke and his companions fought and killed Corypheus.

“Are you absolutely certain you killed him?” Vivienne asked.

“Yes, I’m certain! It’s not like he was the first person I’d killed,” Hawke insisted.

“We looted his body,” Varric added. “It was getting cold just like anybody else.”

Solas suddenly recalled Varric shouting at Hawke outside the gates of Haven. No challenges! He doesn’t stay dead, remember?

His ears filled with the hiss of barely contained panic.

He had never bothered to investigate how Corypheus had returned to the surface. Impatient to unlock his Orb, Solas had only seen the magister as a tool to be used. In his haste, he had chosen another immortal being, and had unleashed a hell of his own making upon the whole world.

He almost fled just then, out of crushing fear and shame. His feet actually pointed themselves towards the door. Only centuries of discipline kept him in his seat.

Helen replayed the Conclave explosion for the few who had not yet seen it. Fiona asked, “Champion, did Corypheus have the orb when you encountered him?”

“No. Trust me, if he had, we’d have taken it for ourselves.”

“I think it’s Tevinter,” Dorian said. “There are paintings in the Magisterium's archives of men holding similar orbs. They were depictions of a time long before the magisters. The ancient Dreamers, perhaps. The texts called those orbs ‘somnaborium’--‘vessels of dreams.’ Could they be the same thing?”

“It is elven,” Solas interjected. “I have seen such things in the Fade. The ancient elves used them as foci to harness magical energies.”

Dorian said, “What, just like that one? Are you sure?”

Yes, human. Exactly like that one.

Solas managed to keep his tone mild. “Perhaps. The humans of ancient times took much from the elves.”

“And Corypheus isn't far removed from the time. Hmm,” Dorian mused.

Solas noticed Helen giving him a slightly puzzled look. He could hardly blame her. He had once asked her to keep this very fact a secret. Now here he was, blurring it out for everyone. If she ever asked about it, he’d have to come up with some plausible excuse.

But the truth was Solas simply could not stomach the thought of giving Tevinter the credit for his Orb that he had created with his own will.

He tried to focus as Helen switched topics. She passed out a single-page “cheat sheet” to everyone. Small images and short descriptions of each enemy were listed in alphabetical order.
“Here’s what we know so far about red lyrium,” she said. “It invades every part of the body. Muscular, skeletal, and nervous systems undergo rapid mutations. Even subjects that maintain a comparatively normal outward appearance have enhanced reaction times, greater strength, and better stamina.

“The Venatori and Red Templars both exhibit new growth throughout their entire nervous systems, from the brain all the way down to their toes.

“But the Red Templars aren’t simply enhanced. They’ve been commandeered. I found significant degeneration in the frontal and temporal lobes of their brains.”

She pulled up rotating, three-dimensional images of two brains.

“This is a scan of a normal, healthy brain. And that is the brain of a Red Templar I killed in Haven.

“See these lesions? The frontal lobes are responsible for memory, language, judgment--the things that give us our sense of self are in the frontal lobes. The temporal lobes handle things like visual and auditory input.

“The Red Templars are literally not themselves. As you’ll see soon enough, it means they’re easier to fool, but they don’t have normal fear reactions.

“We’re going to look at footage from Redcliffe and Haven. You’ll see every enemy listed on your cheat sheet, along with what worked and what didn’t.

“More importantly, you’ll see just how far Corypheus is willing to go to bring about his own vision of a better world.”

The playback began with Cassandra, eyes burning with red lyrium, sitting on the filthy floor of a jail cell.

Several people in the room quietly gasped. Even Vivienne put a hand over her mouth and shook her head.

The Seeker’s warped voice told Helen and Dorian how Corypheus had slaughtered Haven, raised a demon army, and murdered the Empress of Orlais.

“Can you fight?” asked Helen. “We need to get to Alexius, and go back in time to prevent this from ever happening.”

“I will fight. Are you recording right now?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Show us when you get back. Do not let us look away.”

The War Room was silent as the recording moved to the outside courtyard of Redcliffe. The Breach was everywhere. Large chunks of the castle aimlessly floated several stories above the ground.

Solas flinched when he caught a glimpse of himself, just as infected with red lyrium as Cassandra had been.

Then his own corrupted voice filled the War Room. “Min’ahn garamath visalin’il vesh’var’len’en
enuralas.”

Helen paused the playback. For the first time in weeks, she looked him fully in the eyes and asked, “Solas, would you mind translating for the room, please?”

Solas cleared his suddenly dry throat. “I said, ‘This is what happens when men act like gods.’”

Everyone around him nodded, or shook their heads, or murmured in agreement.

Solas said nothing. The others had taken his words as wisdom from beyond the grave. Only Solas heard the very personal warning.

As the playback resumed, Helen quietly said, “Serannasan Ma, Solas.”

He was too shaken to respond.

As they made their way through Redcliffe castle, Helen would occasionally pause and say things like, “Watch how Dorian takes out that Spellbinder,” and “See how they make that little spin before they strike? Get them when their back is turned.”

And so on. Helen calmly discussed concrete, tangible ways they could defeat their enemy. Dorian weighed in, as well.

After they got through the list of Venatori, Helen said, “Right before the evacuation of Haven, I made arrangements with Commander Rutherford to retrieve my omnitool in the event of my death. You’ll hear the commentary as we go along.”

Solas trained his eyes on the omnitool’s display and pretended he was not drowning in recriminations.

“All Cullen, when you see this, let the others know. Red Templars burn just fine but I don’t know if they’re aware of the pain.”

“All Cullen, you almost have to take the bigger ones apart to stop them.”

The entire recording was like that. Helen had never once lost her focus on the mission. There was no self-pity, no remorse. She did, however, occasionally lose her temper.

“I don’t know how their armor is—mother fucker! The fuck is wrong with you people?”

“Maker’s balls, girl,” Blackwall chuckled. “You swear like a sailor, you know that?”

Helen pointed at herself and said, “Navy.”

Then a giant red thing appeared on the screen. Helen paused the playback and said, “Right, so, that’s the Behemoth. It kind of...well, let’s just say it’s about to get really ugly.”

She was correct. It got very, very ugly indeed. Solas winced as he watched Helen receive most of the injuries he and Rose had subsequently healed.

Finally, Helen played her confrontation with Corypheus.

“I don’t kneel for darkspawn.”

“That was a lie,” Helen warned them. Sure enough, Corypheus flourished Solas’ orb and forced her to kneel.
Solas gripped the table as it happened. Witnessing Helen’s torture was bad enough. Watching it happen with his own orb offended Solas so deeply that he almost felt violated.

“Could you repeat that? I wasn’t paying attention.”

The rowdier elements in the room cheered or laughed as Helen taunted Corypheus, but Solas could only shake his head. Her behavior had bordered on foolhardy.

Once they had watched her escape, Helen stopped playback and said, “All right. Thoughts?”

Vivienne said, “Ice for those larger Red Templars.”

“I agree,” said Hawke.

“Those pitch grenades were pretty effective, too,” said Varric. “Especially with fire.”

Helen said, “The grenades were Cullen’s idea. I’d wouldn’t have lasted long without them.

“What else? Speak candidly, people. Let’s brainstorm.”

”Ooo! Exploding arrows!” Sera cackled.

Helen’s eyes lit up, and she looked at her advisors. “Can we do that?” she asked eagerly.

Leliana and Cullen talked about hiring an arcanist. Bull suggested the Inquisition heavy weapons get a little heavier. Fiona recommended using force mages on the front lines to alter the terrain to their advantage.

Cassandra wondered how Corypheus had managed to get a dragon under his thrall. This triggered an intense debate about whether the dragon was an actual archdemon, or “just” a corrupted high dragon. Opinion seemed to coalesce towards the latter, especially after Leliana said, “That thing is not an archdemon. I fought one before and it wasn’t anything like that.”

For the rest of the afternoon, everyone asked questions and exchanged ideas. No suggestion was shot down or belittled, as enthusiasm for the fight began to build. They all felt it—they were a part of something noble, something bigger than themselves. Whatever their personal opinions of Helen might be, everyone believed in her. The faith that Helen would see them through the war sparked hope in everyone present.

Everyone, that is, but Solas. He just wanted the meeting to end so he could go panic somewhere in private.

When the suggestions finally tapered off, Helen asked, “I think that’s enough for today. Any questions?”

Bull raised his hand and said, “Not to bring the room down, but if Corypheus is immortal, how are we gonna beat him?”

The joviality faded in the wake of Bull’s cold, practical question.

Helen thought about it for a moment, then replayed the part where Corypheus said, “Beg that I succeed. For I have seen the throne of the gods and it was empty.”

She paused with the closeup of Corypheus’ face.
“By any objective analysis, this was when I was at my most vulnerable. I had no backup, my biotics were shot, and he had me dangling by the wrist. I was at his mercy.

“But look at his expression,” she said. “Does that look like a man who feels in control?”

“He looks frightened,” Leliana said. “Almost betrayed.”
Helen nodded, “Exactly. His god stood him up. He’s never gotten over it.”

Then she pointed at Corypheus’ face. “That man has the Red Templars, the Venatori, the Wardens, the Orb, and a dragon. But for all that, he marched on an unfortified village and failed. He didn’t get the Anchor, I’m still alive, and he lost another army.

“I don’t know how we’re going to defeat him, Bull, and I’m not about to underestimate him. But I’ve captured or killed every slaver I’ve ever chased. I’m not about to lose to this one.”

Finally, she said, “All right, everyone. Dismissed.” Solas was the first to stand up.

Helen continued talking over the sounds of chairs scraping over the floor as people got up to leave. “Trainers, get this information about the enemy to your charges. Make sure they know what to expect. Ground team, check in with Harritt about your gear.

“And Solas?”

He stopped walking and glanced over his shoulder as people streamed past him. Please, do not ask me to stay.

“Please stay. I need to discuss something with you.”

Solas avoided Helen’s gaze as he reluctantly made his way back to the War Table. He did not want to talk to Helen right now, nor to anyone. He needed solitude and space to evaluate his mistakes. Unfortunately, Helen was already sitting at the War Table and pulling out the chair on her left.

He sat down and said, “What can I do for you, Inquisitor?”

“It will be easier just to show you.”

Helen played a recording from her escape through the mining tunnel. She had encountered a rift and four Despair demons. The Anchor opened a second, more powerful rift, which had swiftly neutralized everything.

“I didn’t consciously do that. It almost seemed like the mark acted on its own.”

“Interesting.” Solas said. It wasn’t really, not at the moment. “That was a focus-based ability.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You’ll recall that the orbs were used as foci?”

“Yes.”

“Contact with the orb must have transferred some of that ability to the Anchor.”

“All right, but...what is ‘focus’?” Helen asked.

“Ah,” he said, hiding his impatience to leave. “Focus is a by-product of will. When one successfully exerts their will upon the world, that particular action or intent is made easier by its success. Over time, you can achieve greater and more powerful results with less effort. In magical terms, that translates into surplus energy, that is to say, focus.”

“So the Anchor and the orb act like,” Helen thought for a moment, “my people would have called them ‘batteries.’ Devices that store energy to be used later.”
“A simplistic analogy, but not inaccurate,” he responded, his mind already back to Corypheus.

Should he get an agent to the Vinmarks to investigate? Maybe there was still information in that Warden prison that would help. Placing an agent within the Wardens themselves was unlikely. Perhaps he should recruit—

“Are you alright, Solas? You look like you need a drink.”

Her voice startled him out of his reverie. Solas was unsure if she asked out of genuine worry for a former friend, or her ingrained professionalism. Either way, brushing off her concerns seemed unwise.

“A drink would be welcome but unhelpful,” he sighed. “And I apologize, Inquisitor. Between learning that our enemy is apparently immortal, and seeing myself infected with red lyrium…”

He let his voice trail off, knowing Helen would reach accurate, albeit incomplete, conclusions about the reasons for his current state of mind.

And indeed, she shook her head and said, “I’d honestly forgotten that I’d never shown you any footage from Redcliffe. It was inconsiderate of me to spring it on you like that in front of everybody. I apologize.”

“No apology is necessary. You needed to illustrate what Corypheus is capable of and you have done that. Rather effectively, I might add.”

A thought occurred to him, “Did my future counterpart have any other messages or warnings to give?”

She hesitated, giving him a searching look before saying, “He did give me some private advice, but did not want the conversation recorded.”

His eyebrows raised in surprise. “I specifically told you not to record?”

His bad mood must have seeped into his tone, because rather than answering the question with a simple, “yes,” Helen played it for him.

Solas watched in fascinated horror as she found him in his cell. Seeing his ruined face and hearing the heartbreak in Helen’s voice was a shocking reminder of their fate if they failed to stop Corypheus.

“Stop recording for just a moment, my friend. I would speak with you privately.”

The next scene was of Helen and Solas walking through the dungeons to find Dorian and Cassandra. “We can watch the rest of it, if you wish,” she said.

“No, thank you.”

She turned the omnitool off. Solas found himself unreasonably angry with his dead, future self. “You never told me we spoke privately in the future.”

“I never told anybody.”

“Allow me to hazard a guess,” he surmised. “Nobody asked.”

“Nobody asked,” she said, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Although if they had, I still would not have told them. His message was entirely personal in nature and had nothing to do
Her steady gaze flickered with knowledge that Solas did not possess. He burned with curiosity about what he had said to her. She likely knew that.

But if she had not told him about it when he was in her good graces, why would she share such a thing now?

“Was there anything else I can help you with?” he asked.

She studied him for a moment. “You know, I was surprised you told everyone the orb was elven. I would have thought you’d prefer they think it was from Tevinter.”

Fenhedis. Solas knew this conversation would take place, but he had not expected it so quickly.

So, he inclined his head once, as if conceding her point. “I did consider it. However, anybody who looked into its ‘Tevinter origins’ would eventually learn that the orb is, in fact, an elven artifact.”

She tilted her head skeptically. “We have one Tevinter mage working for us, another in custody, and a third as our sworn enemy. All of them have either stated or implied that the orb is from Tevinter.

“‘Looking into it’ would require a pretty thorough investigation, don’t you think? Rather hard to do in the middle of a war.”

She looked him over once before adding, “And you're not one to overestimate people's abilities.”

Solas really did not like where this conversation was going.

“As I said before, Inquisitor, too often elves become targets during times of trouble. I felt it best to share what I know than to be accused of hiding the truth.”

“Right. Well, we can't have that,” she said with steely eyes. “Except I have also been hiding the truth, and at your request. Now I’m not sure why.”

“Without proof that Corypheus still had the orb,” he snapped, “elves would have taken the blame! Now that he has reappeared, elves need to be seen as trusted allies. Every time something of import happens, elves must adjust their lives lest they suffer the consequences!”

“I know.” Helen stood up and, using her biotics, began stacking the chairs around the table up against the wall. “The reason I know is because someone took considerable time and patience to educate an ignorant offworlder about the plight of the elves.

“He asked me to keep the orb’s provenance to myself, so I did. Even my advisors have no idea that he was the first person to see the recording of the Conclave.

“Of course, it's not my secret. It’s his. If he wants to divulge it, that’s his prerogative.

“But it does make me wonder about his motives for telling me in the first place.”

Solas stood as well and used his magic to help with the rest of the chairs while he tried to come up with a plausible answer. They finished at the same time, meeting halfway on the opposite side of the table.

He looked at her. This was not the heart-broken Helen from the evacuation camp. This was not even the scorned and seething Herald who had walked next to him for days in freezing silence.
This was the dangerously observant naval officer who used to run intelligence operations for her military.

“You are right. I could have held my tongue when Dorian spoke,” he admitted. “But Tevinter built their empire on the bones of my people. I would deny them credit for the most powerful artifact seen in an age.”

Her face softened a bit. “Yeah, I get that. And it certainly explains why you looked at Dorian like he’d just stolen your wallet.”

“I am quite certain I did no such thing,” he said dryly.

Her lips quirked up a touch. “I must have imagined it, then.”

He could not pretend to be amused, not in his current state of mind, but he was also loathe to let go of this slight thaw between them.

“You look well,” he said quietly. “Leadership suits you.”

She looked over at the windows and sighed, “I suppose we’ll find out, but thank you for saying so.”

Then she looked back up at him and said, “And thank you for answering my questions about the Anchor. I’m sure I’ll have more questions for you later, but that’s all for now.”

“You know where to find me, Inquisitor,” he said, recognizing the dismissal. He turned and walked out of the War Room without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

My thanks are due, as always, to my betas for their feedback and eye to detail on this chapter. Duinemerwen and Dreadlordcherrycake help me keep this story from flying apart.

I am falling behind in responding to your comments from the last chapter and I apologize for that. (I’m trying to get caught up in my life.) I want all of you to know that I’m deeply grateful for everyone’s continued support of this story and Helen’s journey.
Chapter sixty-one

Chapter Summary

Helen gets to work and gets some schooling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter sixty-one

“The Grand Game,” Helen learned, was the Orlesian term for what the rest of the universe called “dirty politics.”

She spent a couple of days memorizing the titles, masque patterns, family crests, and other signifiers of the various groups that wielded power in southern Thedas and Orzammar. It reminded her of learning military ranks across the Milky Way races, or the colonial markings of turians.

Once Leliana and Josie were satisfied that Helen knew the basics, they turned her over to Vivienne for an afternoon. Vivienne had claimed the alcove of the Grand Hall for herself, no doubt because it allowed her to look down on everyone else.

Helen showed up feeling rather fetching in new, cream-colored leathers. Vivienne wore a brilliant, silver-and-sage duster accented with Silverite. Her tasteful cosmetics extended all the way down to her décolletage, which she had dusted with shimmery powder. Helen, with her clean skin and muted color scheme, looked positively drab in comparison.

She didn’t bother wondering if it was deliberate.

Vivienne wasted no time telling Helen to keep her mouth shut about the origins of Thedas.

“I won’t belabor this too much, my dear, as I believe bygones should be bygones. But it bears repeating that nobody wants to hear your theories about the races in Thedas.”

Helen sighed a bit impatiently. “Yes, I did actually notice that. Perhaps it also bears repeating that I wouldn’t have said anything at all until I was directly asked about it.”

“And what difference did that make?” Vivienne asked. “It doesn’t matter why you said it, Inquisitor. What matters is that not a single person came to your defense, even though you were among friends and behind closed doors.”

“Yes,” Helen said dryly. “I noticed that, too.”

“Good. It may have been a painful lesson, but it was one that needed learning. If you must offend people, use something they’ll be inclined to believe. They won’t take you seriously if they think you’re lying.”

“I wasn’t lying.”
“Again, my dear--what difference does that make?”

Having thus established Vivienne’s commitment to truth, they began.

Helen knew the basics of the Orlesian civil war. Empress Celene held the throne. Her cousin, Grand Duke Gaspard du Chalons, was trying to take it. The bad blood between the two had gone back for years. Beyond that, Helen didn’t know much.

Vivienne did.

She had been Celene’s Court Enchanter. Gaspard was the widowed son-in-law of Vivienne’s lover, Duke Bastien de Ghislain. To say that Vivienne was “in the know” was a massive understatement.

Gaspard, who had married Callienne de Ghislain, had originally been in line for the throne. Callienne arranged for Celene’s mother to die in a “hunting accident.” Celene’s father then arranged a similar “hunting accident” for Callienne.

“Celene’s father died a few days later from the illness,” Vivienne said, giving the slightest emphasis on the word “illness.”

“What sort of illness?”

“The kind that winds up in cups of wine and on the ends of knives, of course,” Vivienne replied, looking almost disappointed in Helen for bothering to ask.

“So, people were murdered, and nobody did anything? No arrests or trials?”

“Commoners commit murder, my dear. Nobles play the Game. Do you remember the man that accosted you at my estate?”

“Yes.”

“That sort of public confrontation is terribly uncouth. If he’d had any sense, he’d have smiled to your face, whispered behind your back, and arranged for your carriage to be attacked by ‘bandits’ on the way home.

“Had you died, it would raise his standing in the Game.

“Had you survived, word would spread that his attack had failed, and he would live in fear of your pending retaliation. If he later died under suspicious circumstances, everyone would assume it was either at your hand or by your order. All of which would raise your standing in the Game.”

“But he wouldn’t have attacked my carriage,” Helen pointed out. “He would have attacked your carriage. You sent for me, after all.”

“It’s just an example, darling. My point is that, when it comes to the Game, you either play or you’re being played.

“Now, where was I?”

“Celene’s dead parents and Gaspard’s dead wife.”

Vivienne nodded her thanks and explained that Celene outmaneuvered Gaspard for the throne, and was crowned Empress of Orlais at the age of sixteen.

Celene was devoted to learning and the arts. She eliminated much of the censorship at both the
University of Orlais and at the Grande Royeaux theater. Scholars and artists flocked to Val Royeaux. Orlais had been experiencing its own Renaissance, as a result.

The Empress had also made marginal improvements to the lives of the elves. She had granted trading licenses to exceptional elven merchants and pushed the University to admit promising commoners, including elves.

Vivienne then noted, “Regrettably, Celene made poor a choice in a lover--her elven handmaid, Briala.”

Helen did not bother to hide her frown.

“You begin to see the problem,” Vivienne said.

“I see several, not the least of which is an enormous abuse of power.”

Vivienne shrugged. “Celene is hardly the first ruler to take an elven lover, any more than Briala was the first elf to sleep her way to the top.

“But Celene never married. Indeed, for much of her reign, she held out the possibility of her hand as a way to influence other nobles. Unfortunately, Celene waited too long. She reached her mid-thirties with neither husband nor heir, and the line of succession became an open question.

“Furthermore, Briala was not just some infatuated handmaid. She was Celene’s spymaster. Servants at the palace play the Game as much as any noble, and Briala played better than most. She and Celene had both trained as bards. They knew how to keep information quiet and carried on their affair for many years with none the wiser.

“As often happens, several dreadful things occurred all at once. The Chantry exploded in Kirkwall. The Circles fell, and war broke out between mages and Templars. The elves of Halamshiral were in a state of near-open rebellion.

“For all Gaspard despises the Game, he certainly knows how to play. He secretly commissioned a theater production that depicted Andraste as so besotted by Shartan that she ignored the war. In case the parallels weren’t clear enough, he had Shartan played by a woman.

“I’m sure you can guess who was in attendance for opening night.”

“Celene?”

“Celene,” Vivienne confirmed. “She put down the elven rebellion by marching on Halamshiral and setting fire to the slums.”

“Wait,” Helen asked aghast. “Celene marched on a civilian population?”

“Yes.”

“Her own civilian population.”

Vivienne sighed, “This story is long enough without you repeating it back to me, Inquisitor.”

Helen raised a hand in apology. Vivienne continued, explaining that Gaspard ambushed Celene and her troops as they returned from Halamshiral.

Celene and champion, Ser Michel, managed to escape, as did Briala. Several weeks later, Celene reappeared in Val Royeaux. Neither Briala nor Ser Michel was with her.
For the moment, Celene tenuously held the throne. But her champion was missing, and the war cost her both money and lives. The marginal improvements Celene had made for the elves were now perceived as nothing more than favors for her ex-lover, not real progress.

Complicating matters was Briala herself. She was leading groups of elves to harass both Gaspard’s and Celene’s troops so that neither could gain the upper hand. Briala’s troops had gained a reputation of appearing out of nowhere, inflicting carnage, and then vanishing without a trace.

“And that, my dear, is the state of Orlais, our shield against Tevinter,” Vivienne sighed, as she adjusted her posture to better reflect the light off of her cleavage.

Helen stood, walked over to the balcony rail, and stared out over the Grand Hall. The late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows and lay across the rubble that had not been cleared away.

“I assume you’ve heard that Celene is considering holding peace talks at some sort of ball?” she asked over her shoulder.

Vivienne rose and joined her at the railing with an amused smile. “Of course, I’ve heard, darling. Who do you think told Josephine?”

Helen chuckled. “Right. Sorry, I should have known.”

Vivienne looked a bit pleased at that, but her face grew serious again. “Celene won’t bother inviting the Inquisition unless she sees us as a true power. Securing an invitation is going to be largely up to you.”

Helen nodded. “I know. I’ll get us there.”

“And it won’t be ‘some sort of ball,’ Inquisitor. It will be a Grand Masquerade. All eyes will be on you.”

“Meaning?” Helen asked with raised eyebrows.

“Meaning your every move will be scrutinized. What you wear, what you say, who you talk to—no detail is too small.”

Helen thought about that for a moment. “What will be expected of me?”

“What an astute question,” Vivienne replied, and Helen genuinely could not tell if she was being sarcastic or not. “It’s the Grand Game, Inquisitor. The only expectation is that you’re playing to win.”

Just then, Solas walked out of the rotunda, wiping plaster off of his hands with a small towel. He did not look up at her as he strode out of the Grand Hall, but Helen noticed his ears flicked towards the alcove.

“I don't know what to make of Solas,” Vivienne said, a little too innocently. “So much knowledge and so little personal history. I find that...peculiar, don't you?”

Helen shook her head. “Given everyone’s reaction to my own personal history, I can hardly blame people for wanting their privacy.”

It was a total dodge, but Helen was not discussing Solas with Madame Sparkletits.
“Don’t be obtuse, my dear. It was not your personal history that upset people, as you well know.”

“What was it, then—the concern that I was wrong? Or the fear that I was right?”

She kept her gaze steady, all but daring Vivienne to call Helen a liar.

After a moment, Vivienne arched a perfectly tweezed eyebrow and said, “You’re playing to win already. Good.”

It wasn’t high praise, but Helen took it as a victory nonetheless. She said, “Thank you for the history lesson, Madame de Fer. It’s been very enlightening.”

“Any time, my dear. You know where to find me.”

**

The following morning. Mother Giselle intercepted Helen in the Grand Hall and delivered some news—Cecilia has given birth just after midnight.

“Mother and baby are both healthy. I thought you would want to know.”

In truth, Helen had genuinely forgotten about Cecilia’s existence and didn’t much like being reminded. She also had some lingering resentment against Giselle for the stunt she’d pulled at the evacuation camp.

But Helen had larger concerns now, and sniping at Mother Giselle was uncalled for.

She kept her tone pleasant. “Thank you for telling me. You’d taken Cecilia under your wing, I believe. How is that going?”

“Not as well as I would have hoped,” Giselle admitted. “Cecilia is an angry young woman, and she was not receptive to either the Chant or to learning.

“Perhaps now that she is a mother, she will be motivated to make changes for the sake of her son.”

Helen doubted it but kept that opinion to herself. “Has she named the baby?”

“She named him Ivan, after his father.”

*Of course, she did.* “All right. I appreciate you taking the time to help her.”

“I am honored, Inquisitor.”

Helen nodded and then firmly put stupid Cecilia out of her mind.

She spent the next two weeks getting back to her fighting weight and working with anybody and everybody who could help get the Inquisition on its feet.

She and the advisors spent most of their time trying to bring order to chaos. There was no Orlesian Division of Land Management to monitor resource usage, no Ferelden Highway Patrol to keep criminals in check. Instead, there was a patchwork of nobles, guilds, and mayors who bickered and hoarded power.

As a result, simple problems festered for years. Helen began to see why the Chantry held so much sway. For all its flaws, it was the only centralized power in all of southern Thedas.
Spending so much time with her advisors also gave her a chance to get to know them better.

Josephine was rather stiff with Helen at first, calling her “Inquisitor” and acting in a very formal manner. Helen tolerated it for about a week, before having Josie for a private lunch in the War Room. It only took a couple of gentle questions before Josephine pushed away her plate, covered her face with her hands and sobbed her heart out.

Josie had witnessed the civilians of the Inquisition—people she had personally hired and, in some cases, trained—cut down by Corypheus’ Army in Haven. Workers had tried to take up arms, but of course, they didn’t stand a chance.

Helen felt terrible. She’d never once asked Josie how she’d fared during the attack. “I’m so sorry, Josie. I should have checked on you before now and it was thoughtless of me not to do so.”

Josie waved her hand and said, “No apologies. We wouldn’t be here at all if not for you.”

She daintily blew her nose, sat up straight and said, “Enough of my silliness. I have work to do. Tell me your thoughts on Skyhold’s furnishings. Now that we are in Orlais, did you want a distinctly Orlesian decor? Or perhaps something that highlights our alliance with the mages. Any preferences for color schemes?”

Helen laughed, a bit embarrassed, and said, “My decorating concerns are limited to ‘does it work?’ and ‘is it sanitary?’ Beyond that, I’ll defer to your good taste.”

“Thank you,” Josie said, patting Helen’s hand. “That was the right answer.”

A couple of days later, Helen found herself counseling Leliana.

Before the attack on Haven, Leliana’s scouts at the outer perimeter had gone silent. Leliana, uncertain what the silence represented, had pulled the rest of her agents from the field. Now she agonized that she had made the wrong decision.
“We should have known it was coming! We heard about it in that red future! Why didn’t we prepare?”

Helen said, “Because it never occurred to me that he had a backup army. I guess I lacked the imagination to see the bigger picture. But for whatever it’s worth, I’d have pulled my people back, too.”

“But if we’d have more time—"
Leliana frowned, unconvinced. “Our people understand that the Inquisition may call upon them to give their lives. Cullen sacrificed four men so you could get to the trebuchet.”

“Cullen and his men knew what we were up against by then. You didn’t. Maybe your lost agents sent word and their ravens were shot down. Maybe the agents you recalled to Haven saved lives during the attack.

“But whatever the case, your instincts were right. Their lives matter.”

“Can we afford such sentimentality? What if Corypheus—”

“Jesus, Leliana, you’re better than Corypheus,” Helen interrupted. “I know we’re at war, but if we have to make sacrifices, let’s sacrifice the enemy first, all right?”

Leliana gave her a thoughtful look, then nodded her head and went back to work.

The biggest surprise came from Cullen. One morning, after the daily meeting was over and Helen was leaving the War Room, Cullen said, “Inquisitor? May I have a moment?”

He handed her a thin sheaf of papers. It read:

_Code of Conduct for Inquisition Troops and Service Personnel._

“It’s just a draft,” he explained. “I still need to discuss it with the other advisors, but I wanted you to see it first.”

Helen leaned back against the wall, one foot propped up behind her, and skimmed through it.

It was nothing like the carefully worded and strictly defined military codes Helen was used to seeing. This was short and to the point. Property crimes and petty offenses were treated with barracks restrictions, community service, or time in the dungeons. Serious violence would result in banishment. Murder or attempted murder would result in execution.

“Didn’t the Inquisition already have a code of conduct in place?” Helen asked, flipping through it.

“We did, but I felt it was time to make some changes.”

_He’s taking responsibility._ Helen handed the papers back to him, then held out her hand. When Cullen reached out his, she grasped him by the wrist. “Good work, Commander.”

He blinked a couple of times, before he said, “Thank you,” very quietly.

“Are you eating properly?” she asked as they walked out of the room.

“I am.”

“I’m meeting Sera for lunch. You’re welcome to join us.”

Cullen suddenly looked worried. “Er, no. Sera brought me cake this morning. Said I looked hungry. I can’t decide if she was being sincere or if there’s some horrible surprise.”

“Oh, I guarantee it’s ‘horrible surprise.’ Want me to scan it for you first?”

He chuckled. “No, that’s quite all right. I’ll throw it out. See you later, Trevelyan.”
Helen found Sera in the courtyard and said, “Cullen tossed your cake.”

“Bollocks! I used a lot of good salt in that cake! And how did he know?”

“It’s a real mystery, isn’t it? I mean, when people talk about you, it’s always, ‘Oh, that Sera! She’s the best baker!’”

Sera giggled and said, “Right. Fair point. Let’s eat, yeah?”

**

Helen didn’t have much spare time. When she wasn’t in meetings or making decisions, she read every history book Josephine gave her.

But when she needed to clear her head, she wandered around. Skyhold was full of all kinds of little nooks and crannies. Helen would open a door expecting a storage closet, and would instead find a wine cellar, or a tiny, arcane library.

Best of all, Skyhold was always warm and she had plenty to eat. Nobody spat at her or called her names behind her back. It was as close to safe as she’d felt in a long time.

Only two things robbed her of a real sense of security.

The first problem was the new neural growth. It continued to spread rapidly, connecting to her implant and snaking down her left arm.

Every morning, Helen gave herself a series of physical, behavioral, and neurological tests as a precaution. They all came back normal. Her biotics still worked, her memory was intact, and she’d showed no signs of psychosis. Nor was she in any pain.

It should have reassured her, but it didn’t. The parallels to the mutations in the Venatori and Red Templars hit a little too close to home.

Part of her felt like she ought to tell the advisors, but how could she explain it? “I have more neurons than normal?”

And if she did tell the advisors, they’d just call for Solas—who was her second problem.

The longer Helen lived with the knowledge that he was an ancient elf, the more conflicted she felt.

Some of her concern was professional. Namely, why had he been at the Conclave in the first place?

Helen asked Josephine and Leliana for personnel records of everyone on the ground team, hoping to see what the Inquisition had on Solas when he’d arrived. Unfortunately, all of the records from the earliest days of the Inquisition had been destroyed in Haven.

Solas had once said that he’d gone to the Conclave because, as an apostate forever on the run from Templars, he had a personal interest in the peace talks.

That explanation made sense for an ordinary hedgemage, but Solas neither ordinary nor a hedgemage. He was an ancient, immortal elf who happened to be in the same place where an ancient elven artifact was wielded by an immortal magister. A Venn diagram of the situation would have more than a little overlap.

On the other hand, she had seen Solas’ reaction the first time he’d seen the Conclave explosion.
He’d been genuinely horrified. Likewise, he’d seemed truly shaken after the debriefing. That sort of reaction couldn’t be faked.

Whatever else Helen believed, she knew in her bones that Solas would never help Corypheus rebirth the Tevinter Empire that had enslaved elves for centuries.

It all left her in an uncomfortable position—she saw enough to be suspicious, but not enough to accuse.

Plus, Vivienne’s casual comment that Briala had not been “the first elf to sleep her way to the top” bothered Helen.

The idea that Helen could sexually exploit Solas (or anybody) was absurd, and she knew it. She would bet hard money that Solas knew it, too. But she also knew how it would look, especially now that she was Inquisitor.

Part of her brain wanted to argue, *he cared for you, he was attracted to you. You didn’t imagine that.*

But neither had she imagined his rage at hearing he was descended from mere mortals, nor his absence when she’d needed him most.

So, she kept her distance.

The shame of it all was that she needed his help. It shocked her how little objective information she could find about the elves. It was almost as if there had been a deliberate effort to erase their history.

Fiona gave some context for the historical record, confirming Helen’s suspicion that the Exalted Marches on the Dalish had not been justified in any way. “It was never about the elves refusing to fight the darkspawn. It was a land grab, Inquisitor, nothing more.”

But Fiona did not relish discussions of the past. She gave short, vague answers about her time in the Wardens, in the Circle, and about her past life.

Fiona’s inquiry about King Alistair did put one question to rest—Fiona knew damn well who Alistair was. The longing on her face was heartbreaking. Helen neutrally offered to arrange a meeting, but Fiona quickly turned her down, saying it was “too late for that.”

To the extent there was scant information about elves, the libraries had next to nothing about the Qunari. So, Helen tracked down Bull one evening intending to ask questions.

Bull didn’t want to talk about the Qun. He wanted Helen to put on a merc uniform and pose as a Charger.

Curious, Helen agreed. She followed Bull around the courtyard until he sat down with a couple of soldiers named Mira and Tanner.

Bull introduced Helen as “Grim,” as in, “This is Grim. She doesn’t talk much.”

Grim did not contradict the giant Qunari. Grim kept her mouth shut.

Tanner was about 18. He’d joined the Inquisition because he’d wanted a way off the family farm. Mira appeared to be in her early forties. She had been a noblewoman’s bodyguard until she’d seen the Inquisitor face Corypheus and his archdemon at Haven.
“You can’t see something like that and not believe,” said Mira.

*Jesus, lady, all I did was get my ass kicked,* Grim did not say.

As Bull walked Helen back to her quarters, she asked, “That was very interesting, but why the subterfuge?”

“I know every soldier under my command. You don’t have that option, but a few faces might help.”

“Well, I appreciate it. It was good to get their perspective.”

“No problem. Besides, I wanted you to know that we’re okay, you and me.”

“Nope we not?” Helen asked.

“Not gonna lie, Boss,” he drawled. “I was kinda pissed about you scanning my spunk.”

Helen gave him a rueful look, then stopped walking. She leaned on the battlements and stared at the courtyard below.

“Back home, almost everyone’s DNA was registered at birth. It was one of the main forms of identification. If you voluntarily left a large deposit of your DNA somewhere—like on top of a *filing cabinet*—well, you could hardly complain that somebody else came along later and scanned it to see who’d made the mess.”

Bull chuckled and Helen continued, “Things are different here, obviously. I’m still not clear on Thedosian privacy standards, but I was reasonably sure that getting the genetic information you’d left behind violated whatever social norms you have.

“I had to decide between observing the values of another culture or getting the information I wanted. I chose the information.”

Bull’s horns tilted skeptically. “Yeah, well, there’s information and then there’s information. It’s not like you needed it for the mission or anything.”

Helen looked at the moon above them. She realized with a start that it was the first time she’d bothered to look up at the night sky since closing the Breach.

“I want to know what happened to the Initiative,” she said quietly. “The only answers left to me are written in the DNA of Thedas.”

Bull grunted softly and shook his head. “Well, like I said, I was kind of ticked off. But that fact is, if I’d been in your shoes, I’d have done the same damn thing.

“So listen. We’re okay, but if you learn anything else about the Qunari, I want to know.”

She looked at him cautiously. “It almost sounds like you believe me.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I believe you. It makes a lot more sense than the Maker or the Creators or any of that other religious bullshit. Besides, I saw what it cost you to tell the truth.”

Helen’s gaze involuntarily flicked over to the rotunda.

They stood there in silence for a minute until Bull said, “You do know he’s kind of a prick, right?”

Helen’s startled laugh broke through the melancholy that had begun to wrap around her. She
pushed off from the battlements and started walking towards her quarters again.

“I’m not badmouthing the guy behind his back or anything. I’ve said it to his face,” Bull reassured her, keeping pace next to her.

“Yes, that's very honorable of you.”

“Hey, I’m an honorable guy.”

They chatted the rest of the way to her quarters and Helen waved goodnight to him before closing the door behind her.

It wasn’t until she was almost asleep that she realized that she hadn’t asked one question about the Qunari. Not only that, but Bull had managed to pull a fair amount of information from her.

What was it that Vivienne said? “You either play, or you’re being played.” Helen chuckled to herself. That sneaky son of a bitch. She’d been played but found that it didn’t bother her too much. She liked Bull. She didn’t trust him worth a damn, but she liked him.

Still smiling, she rolled over onto her side and fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, a few things here.

First, and as always, thank you so much to dreadlordcherrycake and duinemerwen for their beta work on this chapter. They really do keep me on track, especially given how many edits these chapters tend to go through before final publication on the archive. As always, mistakes are mine, not theirs.
Second, there is (sob!) no ProcrastiKate render for this chapter. Sorry, ProcrastiKate fans!! She has been having technical difficulties. I don't want to give away too many details, but I have it on good authority that we can blame a certain computer manufacturer with a name that rhymes with "Smell."
Third, thank you to everyone who has been kind enough to leave reviews and comments. I wish I had time to answer all of them. My RL has not been generous with spare time.
Fourth, I usually have a "three-chapter" rule--I won't post a chapter until the next three are written. I'm breaking that rule tonight. It's Christmas Eve, I'm off of work for the next day and a half, and I figured a lot of you might be, as well.

For those of you that celebrate Christmas, have a happy and peaceful Christmas. For those of you that don't, have a happy and peaceful December. I appreciate and am grateful for every single one of you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!