Dear Fen'Harel

by blarfkey

Summary

It sounds way too good to be true.

A fellow library patron-- and total stranger -- just happens to notice her pathetic attempts of self-education in between the three jobs it takes to afford rent in Orlais? And then just so happens to be both kind and disgustingly rich enough to offer to pay for her entire ride to any university she wants? And the only thing he wants in return is total anonymity and a pen-pal?

It sounds like something straight out of a hidden camera show. What kind of desperate idiot would fall for a scam like that?

Ellana. Ellana Lavellan is that desperate idiot.

A solavellan Dear Daddy Long Legs AU
“Are you Ellana Lavellan?”

Ellana looks up from *The Rise and Fall of Arlathan* (the book she’s checked out at least ten times in the last year), a bit startled at the intrusion. The only people who approach her at the Orlais National Library are the librarians, usually to kick her out at closing time.

And when she sees the man behind the intrusion, the bottom of her stomach drops out.

He towers over her, with a face that looks too young for the shock of slicked back white hair and the suit too pressed and formal and *expensive* to be accompanied with the twining branches of Mythal’s vallaslin on his forehead. He is the weirdest non-Dalish-looking Dalish she’s ever seen. And even worse, he looks pissed off and he knows her by name.

Instinctively she starts rifling through the last couple of weeks for any customers she might have pissed off. But she works three different jobs, and it’s hard to keep track of all the people she encounters on a day-to-day basis. Besides, another Dalish elf would have stuck out vividly in her memory – he’s the first one she has seen in two years – and Ellana has no memory of him.

Is he some kind of lawyer? Is she about to get sued?

“And sorry,” she says, mustering the polite smile she gives her customers. “I think you have me mixed up with someone else.”

The man raises an eyebrow. “Highly doubtful. You fit the description, and you’re also the only Dalish elf here.”

“Besides you,” Ellana says.

The blank exterior cracks for a second and he looks uncomfortable. It mirrors the way Ellana often feels, when countless strangers point out the most obvious way she is separate from them. The way she sticks out. It’s enough to inspire some kind of irrational and instant kinship with the elf.

“I’m Ellana,” she says. “I’m also super broke so whoever sent you to sue me isn’t going to get very much.”

He doesn’t crack so much as the hint of a smile at the joke. Instead he takes a seat across from her and pulls out a briefcase. Ellana swallows. He really is a lawyer, the expensive kind that Ellana and whatever free lawyer Orlais provides would not hope to match in a court case.

“I’m not here to sue you,” he tells her, opening the briefcase with a crisp snap. “I’m here to offer you an education.”

He doesn’t wait for the reply that Ellana is too flabbergasted to give. Instead, he pulls out a pristine, stapled document and places it between them.

“A contract. If you sign, my client offers to pay for your undergraduate degree at any university of your choosing. He is also willing to pay for graduate school, if you wish to continue your education.”
Immediately her hackles rise. This is too random. Too strange. Too close to the dream she keeps close to her chest, even as it withers with each passing year.

“This is some kind of joke,” she says coldly, folding her arms. “Who put you up to this? Alistair? I don’t think he’d be this cruel, but he is a bit of an idiot and I am going to kick his fucking ass.”

It had to be Alistair. Her roommate’s the only one who knows of her dreams for college, even though she couldn’t pay for it in a million years. Maybe he thought the joke so obvious that she wouldn’t consider it for a second. Maybe he didn’t realize how very badly she wanted a degree. Whatever impulse behind this prank, it stings. And she’s going to stain all his clothes pink when she gets home.

“This is not a joke,” the man says gravely.

“Then where the hell is this coming from?” she demands, her voice raising. Someone on the other side of the room looks up from their book and she almost flushes.

The man studies her for a moment. “Forgive me. Perhaps I have started in the middle and not the beginning. My client is a frequent visitor of this library. He has noticed you several times and has decided that you would benefit from an education and that you are unlikely to procure one on your own. Therefore, he has decided to fund it himself.”

“So . . . he’s a stalker?”

The look this man levels at her is even colder than his default setting. “Is it stalking if you two are occupying the same space at the same time purely through coincidence?”

“It’s weird that he’s been watching me all those times,” she says. “Especially since he apparently sent you instead of coming himself.”

“He wishes to remain anonymous. You do not have to accept his offer.”

“How do I know this isn’t a scam?”

The man pushes the contract over to her side of the table. “Read the contract. You are not obligated to give or pay for anything. You will receive confirmation that the debt to your university is paid before you need to set foot on campus. All that is required of you is to apply to the university of your choosing and to write monthly emails updating him as to your progress.”

Ellana takes the document in hand, even though such an act signifies her willingness to believe in this farce. She looks for any clues that this is all fake; inconsistencies, grammar errors, unprofessional language.

But the document is pristine. It states that she has full control over what classes she wants, what college she goes to, how long she stays in school. It even includes a stipend for spending money on top of tuition, books, room and board.

Even if this is a scam, the only risk Ellana takes is in having to crawl back to her three jobs if she gets kicked out of the university for not paying tuition.

That and the feeling of having her dreams crushed right when she thought she could achieve them.

“Why,” she asks quietly. “You’re trying to tell me that in exchange for thousands of sovereigns all he wants is a pen-pal? What does he get out of this?”
“He has seen a thirst for knowledge, and he wants to encourage it. He believes in your potential. Do you accept or not?”

“I -- ” Ellana falters, the hopeful and skeptical sides of her clashing.

The expression on his face is almost soft.

“Take the contract,” he says. “I will meet you here, at this table, at this hour, in three days’ time for your answer.”

He stands up, buttons his suit coat, and pauses. “I almost forgot. Whether or not you accept, my client wishes for you to have this.”

He pulls out a book from the briefcase. It’s a copy of the same book that Ellana was reading, only this one isn’t public property and its blank pages are begging for all the notes and highlights and quotes that she has scribbled in a beat-up composition book.

Ellana stares at it for so long, she doesn’t notice when the lawyer packs up his briefcase and leaves.

When the library closes, Ellana heads over to Calenhad, the bar where Alistair works. She spots him flipping bottles in the air and catching them very precariously behind his back. After shattering a hundred-sovereign bottle of vodka and ruining the manager’s shoes, Alistair was banned from such tricks, and only the threat of disappointing the many fans of his charmingly awkward flirty banter kept him from getting outright fired.

Ellana glances around the dark room to make sure that said manager isn’t here to witness Alistair’s rebellion before heading up to the bar.

“That’s some expensive floor cleaner,” she says, nodding at the tequila bottle in his hand, the price of which could pay for their electricity bill.

“I’ve been practicing, thank you very much,” Alistair says. “I haven’t dropped a bottle all day.”

“You just jinxed yourself.”

Alistair raps his knuckles on the wooden bar. “Not anymore.”

“You just jinxed yourself.”

Alistair ignores her in favor of gracing an older woman with a bright blue martini and his trademark grin, the one where his eyes crinkle at the corners. It works disgustingly well, made all the more effective by the fact that Alistair can only flirt decently when he’s not flirting on purpose, making him adorably, obliviously genuine.

“So. What’s up, Buttercup?” he asks, sliding over a glass of lemon soda.

“You would not believe what just fucking happened at the library.”

Immediately, his relaxed and friendly demeanor drops. “Did someone harass you?”

Back when Ellana was painfully naïve and new to the city, humans used to harass her quite a bit, because the only thing worse than being a flat-ear was being a savage, Dalish flat-ear.

“No, no. I’m fine,” Ellana says. “Though this might end up being harassment, come to think of it.”
She explains the weird Dalish elf and the deal he offered as Alistair makes various drinks.

“Are you sure one of the librarians didn’t give you a pot brownie and you hallucinated? Because this sounds utterly unbelievable.”

“It does. I don’t believe it. It’s probably a giant scam that he’s pulled on countless other poor unsuspecting people.”

Alistair gives her a knowing look. “But you want to believe it.”

Ellana sighs and chugs her soda. “Yeah. I do.”

“Are you going to take it?”

“I have no idea.”

By the end of the three days, as Ellana is walking towards the table in the library, she still hasn’t decided on an answer.

The yearning to sign it, to go to college, burns. Only her fear and skepticism keeps it at bay with hundreds of unanswered questions. What if it’s all a cruel joke and the lawyer never shows up? What if she gets to the university and they won’t let her in because her tuition was never paid? Even worse, what if she lives out her first semester and then the university kicks her out with that debt hanging over her head? She would never be able to pay it off. It took three jobs just to afford to live in a closet-sized apartment in Orlais in a barely decent neighborhood. And that’s with a roommate!

She almost hopes that the lawyer never shows, if only to absolve her from making the choice. But no, he stands patiently at the same table, hands crossed behind his back. The contract already sits at the table, a fountain pen resting beside it.

“Good evening, Serah Lavellan,” he says, inclining his head.

“Good evening . . . .” she trails off at the lack of a name.

“Ser Abelas will do.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Your name is ‘Sorrow’?” Creators, what kind of a child was he?

He gives her a frosty stare. “Will you sign or not?”

Ellana takes a deep breath.

Fuck it. What’s worse than all of this turning out to be fake is the regret that would haunt her if she didn’t try. It’s not like she’s got any other options.

“I'll sign.”

Sitting on her bed with her phone in hand, Ellana painstakingly types out her first email. Her benefactor/stalker/whoever-the-fuck wants to be known only as Fen’Harel and Ellana isn’t quite sure how to take that, to be honest.

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: ghestlin_lavellan@tmail.com

Subject: Hello

Dear Fen’Harel

I honestly do not know what to say here. I’ve never had a pen-pal or written very many letters outside of thank-you notes that my foster mom forced me to write. So if this comes out as stilted and awkward, at least you know I got it honest.

Abelas says that you will never write back, so I guess it doesn’t much matter what I write, huh?

Is this your way of getting to know me? There’s probably not much you gleaned from watching me in the library, except for the fact that I’ve read the same book like fifty times and scribble notes about it like a crazy person.

I must have looked seriously pathetic for you to take so much pity upon me that you’re willing to spend thousands of dollars on me.

That is, if this isn’t some giant scam. I’m still not convinced it isn’t and you aren’t just some weird stalker who gets kicks out of screwing over poor Dalish elves. You wouldn’t be the first. And also your pen name is really weird.

I don’t know if you’re Dalish or not (it’s highly unlikely that any Dalish has enough money to pay for strangers’ educations on a whim and we wouldn’t know about them) but Fen’Harel is kind of a touchy subject in our culture.

He’s the renegade cousin of the last great elven king that staged the rebellion that got the entire royal family murdered, which is why Arlathan fell and the elves got their asses kicked by Tevinter and the Chantry.

There’s more to it than that, of course, but I’m not about to get into all the theories about Fen’Harel’s rebellion. You should read the book you bought me if you’re interested. Just know that Fen’Harel has kind of gone down into Dalish legend as a boogey man who’s always out to screw us over and make it look like he’s “helping”. So, if you wanted a clever name for a cruel trick like, say, making a Dalish girl think she’s getting her dream education before sending the university a bunch of bounced checks, Fen’Harel would be pretty damn clever.

Well, if you want details on Ellana Lavellan, you’re going to wait until I’m sitting cushy in my dorm room with all my expenses paid in advance. Then at least I would get to taste one semester of academia before it all crashes and burns.

Oh, and thanks for the book. Now I can start the process of transferring my notes in my notebook to the margins of the book. And color coordinate them with sticky flags. Because I’m a nerd like that. (There. That’s one detail about me as a thank-you present. You’re welcome.)

~ Ellana

“So, are you going to call her?” Alistair asks as he tries to adjust the rabbit ears antenna on the television to get a better signal.

“Call who?”
“Your mother! Or whatever approximation of your mother that she is.”

Guilt squirms in her chest and she tries her best to squelch it down. “Not yet. But I will.”

“Hmm. Sure,” he says with deep skepticism. “Is the picture good now?”

“It’s still a little fuzzy, but I can make out most of it.”

The second Alistair steps away, the nightly news dissolves into white noise.

“Ugh, forget it,” Ellana says, tossing the remote onto the empty milk crates that serve as a coffee table. “I’ll just grab someone’s tossed paper at work tomorrow.”

“Well, now you have more time to call your mum,” Alistair says brightly. “It’s been, what, two months?”

“Alistair,” Ellana groans. “She’s just going to tell me that I’m an idiot for even thinking about accepting the offer and that I should come back home.”

“Come now, that’s not very fair. She’s never said that you needed to go back.”

“She’s implied it.”

“I think that’s your guilt speaking, to be frank.”

Ellana really hates it when he’s right. Even though as Keeper, Istie should be very concerned that Ellana ditched the Dalish to go live in the world of humans, she was the only one who encouraged Ellana.

But there’s a big difference between going to live with humans and putting your entire future and thousands of sovereigns in the hands of a stranger.

“If nothing else, Ellana, just give me her number. That way, if you go mysteriously missing and no one hears from you, I can at least give her a heads up.”

“That’s low, Alistair.”

“Actually, what’s low is telling you how much it sucks to not have a mother or mother figure to call at all.”

She throws a pillow at his face.

“I hate you.”

But she gets off the couch and heads into her room and makes the godsdamn phone call.

“Hello? Ellana?”

As always, the first hello from Istie sends a bolt of homesickness through Ellana. It’s one of the reasons why she doesn’t call very often. She swallows the lump in her throat.

“Aneth ara, Istie,” Ellana says.

“Aneth ara. Thu ea?”

“I’m doing fine,” Ellana answers. “And you? How is the clan? How are the rose bushes doing?”
“Everyone is doing well. My roses are getting a bit out of control. Danyla keeps offering to trim them for me, but my bald patches are still recovering from the last time, so I keep declining her.”

And as always, any mention of other clan members doing Ellana’s old chores feels like a zap with a taser. “You should get Mihris. He should know better; he did grow up in the orchard.”

“Hmm, perhaps. I am picky about who touches my roses, you know.”

Ellana smiles. As Keeper, Istie doesn’t allow herself many personal hobbies outside her duties of tending to the clan, but her rose bushes have won awards all throughout the Dales, and she once chased a teenager from another clan off with a stick for taking one. She trained Ellana from a young age on how to tend them, and because so, Ellana was the only other elf allowed to touch them.

“I do know. Listen, I need your help with something.”

“Da’len, you know I can’t post bail for you again,” Istie warns, but there is a wry edge to her statement.

“That was one time! And making it illegal to feed the pigeons is a stupid law.”

“And that’s the attitude that got you in a cell,” Istie says, with a chuckle. “What is your question?”

Ellana tries her best to describe the situation as both hypothetical and totally not sketchy at all, but Istie sees right through her.

“You’re putting in a lot of trust in a complete stranger that won’t even show you his face,” Istie points out. “I thought you were going to pay for college yourself. That you’ve been saving up for it.”

After two years of hard work, Ellana’s got a grand total of eight sovereigns in her savings account.

“There’s no way I’d be able to save enough.”

“And the scholarships you applied for?”

“A lot of them became void after I graduated high school,” Ellana says, biting her lip.

“So the past two years in Orlais have been ultimately futile,” Istie says in that matter-of-fact tone that Ellana hates so much because it usually means she fucked up in a way she can’t argue herself out of.

“I don’t regret moving here,” she says, defiance leaking into her tone despite her best efforts.

“I’m not saying that, da’len,” Istie says gently. “I am concerned, however, that you moved away because you thought the humans could give you a better education, and after two years of hard work, the only hope you have for this dream is a stranger’s unexpected and potentially untrustworthy charity. I know you, Ellana. You don’t take kindly to debt or pity or a lack of control in your own life. And this offer you describe has all three of those.”

Godsdamn it, Alistair. This is why I didn’t want to call her. In five minutes, Istie completely annihilated all of Ellana’s confidence in this decision. This is a woman who takes days to consider all angles of buying a different brand of toothpaste and it drives Ellana crazy.

And the fact that Istie is always, always right just takes the fucking cake.

“I know it does,” Ellana says. “I don’t like that part, but this is the best shot I have at a degree.”

“You mean it’s the easiest.”
“Maela,” Ellana groans.

“I don’t know why you’re asking for my opinion when you’ve already taken the deal, da’len.”

“I have not!”

The silence on the phone is the sonic equivalent of Istie’s Don’t-You-Dare-Fucking-Lie-To-Me look.

“Okay, I have. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to argue, I just wanted to . . . hear you say that I’m not being a complete and total idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot, Ellana. It could be genuine,” Istie says slowly. “Such kindness is extraordinarily rare, but if you say his lawyer is Dalish then perhaps he is as well. Perhaps he is looking out for one of his own. Just . . . make sure you call me regularly so I know you’re alright.”

Ellana smiles into the phone. “I promise.”

“Now that you have the means, have you given any thought to what university you will try for?”

There is no debate or question about what college Ellana chooses. She emails Abelas the same night she signs the contract and pulls up the website for Skyhold University after she calls Istie.

Ellana has dreamed about Skyhold since before she graduated high school. She’s combed through that course catalog enough to practically memorize it. It’s the jewel of Orlesian higher education. It’s well rounded; it has some of the best programs in Thedas in all manner of fields, from medicine to history to criminal justice to education.

Not to mention that Dr. Solas Felassan, the author of *The Rise and Fall of Arlathan*, teaches there when he’s not doing field work.

Ellana could do anything she wanted with a degree from Skyhold. But the money it would take for even an associate’s degree could pay off the mortgages of everyone in her clan, so she locked that dream away, even if she couldn’t let go of it entirely.

Money isn’t an issue anymore.

Now she just has to get in.

For a month Ellana uses all her free time in the library or at her bed, studying for the entrance exam. She graduated top of her class in high school, but Ellana finds out real quick that a Dalish education doesn’t match up with what the rest of the world got.

For a month, horrible dreams haunt her at night, dreams where the exam is written in nonsense, or in dwarven, or she’s taking a test on experimental physics instead of the entrance exam.

She takes a rare day off work for the test. And despite all the anxiety dreams, the pencil-gnawing, book-throwing (calling up Alistair because she can’t figure out this one math problem and he went to prep school *what do you mean you don’t know math you grew up rich!* ) she walks out of the library feeling fairly confident.

When she gets in the ninety fifth percentile, Alistair takes her out for dinner, and lies to the waitress about it being her birthday so they get free cake.
“You’re moving up in the world,” he says, toasting their beers together in their apartment afterward. “You’re going to leave me all alone to fend off all those vicious grandmothers on Senior Discount Day.”

Even though he’s clearly joking, Ellana’s gut squirms with guilt. Joking or not, the truth is that Ellana’s definitely ditching him to live out her dream in Skyhold and he’s stuck with his shitty apartment and two jobs and the impending need for a new roommate. And the only reason she gets to be educated and he has to rot here is luck.

Pure dumb luck.

“Oh no,” says Alistair, looking at her warily. “You’ve got a bad look on your face. Usually when you have a bad look on your face, somebody gets punched. And right now I’m the only somebody around.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “I’m not going to punch you. It’s just . . . I came to Orlais with nothing and no one, and you – you’ve been an awesome friend to me. You’re always there when I need you. You always make me laugh. I’m going to miss you.”

There’s an embarrassing tightness in her throat, and Ellana shuts up before something equally horrifying can happen, like actual tears.

“Oh, sweet Maker, this is even worse than getting punched in the face,” Alistair moans, thunking his head on the back of the couch. “I’m not drunk enough for feelings-talk. Ugh.”

“Fuck you,” says Ellana, but she’s smiling. “It just sucks that you’re stuck here while I get the chance to better myself. You deserve more than this.” She waves her beer at the large crack that runs down the wall by the TV.

For a moment Alistair stares at the crack and then resolutely sets down his beer on the scuffed-up coffee table and turns to her, suddenly deadly serious.

“Ellana. Don’t you dare, for a millisecond, worry about me. I left behind a life with more privilege than you could ever dream of having, and I did so willingly. And yes, my apartment sucks and working two jobs is exhausting and I still have no idea what the hell I’m going to do that makes it worth the tradeoff. But I swear to the Maker if you go off to Skyhold thinking anything less than that you are a brilliant, sparkling woman who deserves this chance to live up to her potential, I will personally come up there and kick your ass. Do you understand?”

Ellana nods, a suspicious prickling in the corners of her eyes. This is why all the women love him.

“I’m going to hug you now, because I’m tipsy and you’re my best friend, and you’re going to hug me back and not wave your arms around like a lunatic or that awkward patting bullshit. And then we can pretend this whole conversation never happened.”

Alistair gives her that crooked half-smile of his, but he can’t hide the sorrow that lurks in its corner, and Ellana throws her arms around him just so he doesn’t see her own eyes watering.

Asshole.

She gets into Skyhold. She and Alistair go out for dessert at the fancy Orlesian ice cream shop whose “artisan” cones always pop up on celebrity social media with stupid hashtags. Even though they both make fun of the place and would rather go homeless than work there, they also secretly have been
dying to try it.

Turns out the best part of elfroot ice cream is the face Alistair makes when he tries it and the accompanying spat on the pavement, followed by exclamations like “Maker’s balls! How are you eating that?!”

She ends up giving away most of her furniture to Alistair and parks the rest on the curb where it all disappears before morning. Her cot and nightstand sit in Alistair’s closet, just in case.

Despite the photocopy of the tuition check, the email confirmation, the letter about her room assignment, and details about her roommate, Ellana still has her doubts. Even so, she makes her way to Skyhold the first day they allow incoming freshmen.

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: So Far So Good

Dear Fen’Harel,

So I’m at Skyhold. And I have to say that it lives up to all my crazy expectations, of which there were many.

My dorm is tiny, and the two beds, two desks, and two dressers fit with barely any room to breathe. But I’m not a stranger to tiny living quarters so it doesn’t bother me. Especially since the room has a giant window that overlooks the quad in the middle of campus.

And I’m at freaking Skyhold, at least for the semester, so there’s really nothing to complain about.

I remain cautiously optimistic.

I won’t apologize for doubting you, though. You have to admit this whole setup sounds crazy. My old roommate, Alistair, thought I had eaten a pot brownie from one of the librarians and hallucinated the whole thing. I don’t know how I’ll tell anyone else about this. Maybe I’ll make up something more normal-sounding, like a scholarship just for Dalish elves, haha. No one would argue with that because of how fast they’d change that subject.

I recall promising you details about me once I’m sitting cushy in a dorm with all my expenses paid. I’m still not convinced that you aren’t some creepy stalker, albeit a creepy stalker with deep pockets, but I am indeed sitting cushy in a dorm (for now) so I guess I’ll uphold my end of the bargain.

Okay, so my name is Ellana Lavellan (but you knew that already).

I am Dalish. I grew up in a tiny town called Wycombe.

I’m 20 years old. I’ve lived in Orlais since I graduated high school two years ago.

I’ve had all kinds of jobs over the last couple of years. When you met me, I was a barista for a hipster coffee shop, a waitress at a pizza place, and I sold clothes at a store in the mall where everything was 100% cotton (they thought me being Dalish would lend some air of credibility to the place, which is stupid because none of that crap was handmade).

I really like history. It’s my favorite thing to read about.
So there you go. Ellana Lavellan, as promised.

Yours,

Ellana

There is a soft, almost hesitant knock on the door just after she hits send. Ellana looks up to see a young man standing in the doorway, duffel bag in hand.

“If you’re looking for Cremisius, she’s not here yet,” Ellana tells him. She hasn’t seen any hint of her mystery roommate yet, but freshmen still have a couple more days to trickle in.

“I’m, um –” The young man coughs. “I’m Cremisius.”

Ellana stares at him. She takes in the wide, flat chest, the short hair shaved on one side, the lean muscles in his arms, the stark line of his jaw.

“You’re definitely a dude,” she says.

“And you’re . . . Dalish?” he asks, peering closer at her face, eyes tracing over the vallaslin. “Unless that’s some sort of trendy tattoo.”

“No, it’s legit.”

Ellana has grown used to people’s surprise once they realize what she is. Dalish elves have stayed isolated in varying degrees from the rest of Thedas for the last six hundred years. Even now, with the internet and global trade and trains and airplanes making travel so much easier, 99% of Dalish elves prefer to live with their clans and never set foot out of the safety of the Dales.

To humans, the Dalish are almost mythical. And people’s reaction to Ellana brewing their mocha latte is akin to encountering a unicorn in the forest.

“What are you doin—hmm.” Cremisius shuts himself up mid-sentence, for which Ellana is grateful. She has answered that question so many fucking times.

“I guess the dorm people screwed up or something,” Ellana says to change the subject.

Cremisius goes red in the face, and his shoulders tense up.

“Not . . . exactly. I was assigned female at birth, so they won’t put me in the men’s dorms. I’m trying to repeal it, but they’re not listening.”

There’s something in the way he juts his chin out, as if bracing for an inevitable shit-storm over his identity but too proud to show any shame or embarrassment, that cuts Ellana. She knows that feeling from way too many arguments with zealous Andrastians that took her rejection of the Dales to mean rejection of her entire culture and religion.

“What a bunch of assholes,” she says.

Cremisius nods and swallows. “I’m sorry. I know this will probably be awkward for you, but I promise that I– ”

Ellana holds a hand up. “Do you snore?”
“I – I don’t think so.”

“Are you going to blast music without headphones or stumble in drunk at two in the morning or bring random strangers over so you can bang them without telling me?”

“No, I’m not an asshole,” says Cremisius.

Ellana shrugs. “Then I don’t care. I’ve had male roommates before. It’s nothing new to me.”

“Seriously? This doesn’t bother you?”

He wants to believe her, but he’s skeptical that her acceptance is so forthcoming. Ellana felt the same way when Alistair, a devout Andrastian, wasn’t bothered by her Dalish religion. Instead, he set up a calendar in the living room to mark all their combined holidays.

“What bothers me is shitty roommate etiquette. Trust me, I’ve shared rooms with enough of my clan to write a freaking book about it. If you’re considerate, I don’t care about anything else.”

The beginnings of a smile tug at his lips. He sticks out his hand.

“Thank God for all those etiquette lessons my mother forced on me, then. You can call me Krem.”

“Ellana.”

They shake hands. It’s the start of a beautiful friendship.

Freshman Orientation is that afternoon. Krem and Ellana join the flock of anxious freshmen that crowd the auditorium where they will hopefully graduate in four years. The Dean gives a forgettable welcoming speech that Ellana pays no attention to, and then they are sorted by major and last names and introduced to their advisors.

She waits in a line in the hallway as Dr. Pavus signs each of his freshmen up for their first semester’s classes. In her hand she clutches the list of classes and their course codes, having already planned her first two semesters in the library the day she moved in.

(Unfortunately, Dr. Felassan isn’t on campus this semester, but Ellana has at least the next four years to take a class with him.)

“Good afternoon, Ms. Lavellan,” he greets her, swiveling way from his computer to face her. “I’m Dr. Dorian Pavus. Have you decided on a major?”

His youth takes her by surprise, as well as his handsome face. He looks barely thirty, his black hair and thin mustache immaculate, his dark bronze skin warm and clear. Ellana fishes the list out of her pocket and hands it to him.

“Not exactly,” she says, “but I have charted out my first two semesters. Here’s what I’ve planned. I’ll get all my prerequisites out of the way first semester.”

Dr. Pavus scans her list, his eyebrows climbing higher as he reads.

“I admire your ambition, but you can’t have twenty-one hours in your first semester, darling; you’ll have a heart attack before spring break. You’ll need to learn how to walk before you can run. What’s your major?”
He looks up expectantly at her.

“I . . . don’t have one yet,” she says, fighting a hot wave of embarrassment. Humans assume the worst about her ignorance all the time; she doesn’t need to help their cause by looking like an idiotic freshman unprepared for college.

But Dr. Pavus just shrugs. “That’s alright, most freshmen aren’t sure of what they’re doing with their life. Most professors, too, really, though keep that hush hush. I don’t want you to blow our cover of being functional, capable adults.”

A smile twitches on her face.

“The best advice for undecided majors is to treat the first couple of semesters like a buffet,” Dorian continues. “Try a little bit of everything that interests you. Balance it out with two or three of the core prerequisites. That way you’re prepared for anything. What’s your favorite subject?”

“History.”

He turns to the computer and types for a minute in fluid key strokes. “There. I’ve signed you up for Composition 101, Intro to College Algebra, and Intro to Post-Andrastian History. That gives you your Math, English, and History prereqs, which you’ll need for most every major.”

In spiky cursive, he jots down the time and room numbers for her on a sticky note, along with a seven-digit code.

“This is the code you need to sign up for classes. Add whatever entry level class you’re interested in, but I highly advise you don’t add more than two. I’ve seen plenty of freshmen drop out under the weight of their own course load, and it would be a shame to see someone with such potential burn herself out.”

“Thank you,” she says, taking the post-it note and tucking it in her pocket. “What do you teach?”

Dorian laughs. “I teach theoretical mathematics, and my classes routinely make grown men cry. Come find me in four or five years. I could use someone with your enthusiasm.”

The cost of textbooks almost gives Ellana a heart attack.

“Look at this,” she hisses to Krem, waving her thick hardback algebra textbook at him. “This thing costs what I used to make in a paycheck. How the hell do these people get away with this?”

Krem’s face blanches at the sight of the 500-sovereign price tag. “This is for only one book?”

As her stack of books grows, so does Ellana’s apprehension. Were books included in the contract? Would Fen’Harel think it funny to pay for everything except the textbooks she needed just to see how long she would last before she failed?

The tally rings up to well over a thousand sovereigns (just for her first semester), and Ellana swallows hard as she gives her student account number to the cashier.

It takes one long, terrifying moment for the transaction to go through, and then the cashier hands over a receipt for her to sign.

Afterward, Ellana and Krem pass the campus coffee shop and look at the menu longingly.
“Should we even bother after this?” Krem asks. “We’re both broke.”

Ellana thinks about the debit card sitting in her wallet for “personal expenditures”.

“I think we need it,” she says. “This one’s on me.”

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To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Dear Fen’Harel,

It’s like, three in the morning but I just woke up from a nightmare and I can’t get back to sleep, and Alistair is probably still cleaning up the bar, so instead I’m huddled in the bathroom so that the light from my phone doesn’t wake up Krem.

It’s a stupid dream. I wake up and go to class and suddenly I can’t read. Everything’s in gibberish. And I can’t write. Every time I try to take down notes, my pen just draws stupid doodles, or I spell the word wrong and erase it over and over again, while the professor just zips past all this important information and then I start freaking out that I’m missing everything and I can’t even write my name at the top of the paper!

Creators, just thinking about it is giving me a panic attack.

It’s not like this dream will ever come true. I mean, Common is my first language and I started picking up Elvhen after my parents died.

But after two years in Orlais, I know what people think of Dalish elves; that we’re all stupid, backwoods savages who stab any trespasser on sight and can’t read. And I can’t handle the thought of proving any of that right. Even though I didn’t come out of the Dales to serve as any kind of example, I still feel pressured to be perfect. I know that I will probably be the only Dalish elf any human here will ever see in their lives, and I feel this stupid urge to impress them so they think well of my people.

Living up to that example in regular, everyday working life is one thing. But college is a whole different story. There are tons of humans just waiting for me to screw up so they can feel justified in thinking that I’m stupid and I don’t belong here. And I’m terrified that my scraped-together education in the Dales has done nothing to prepare me for a college level course and I’m going to fail no matter what.

I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this. It helps a little bit, getting it all out. But I think I’m trying to warn you. I know you have high hopes for me. I know that you expect me to do something great with the opportunity you’ve given me. And I’m going to give it everything that’s in me.

Just . . . just don’t hate me if I’m not perfect. Just let me keep trying.

Yours,

Ellana

P.S. The price of textbooks is total bullshit. The university store is ripping you off, just saying. You might want to have your sad lawyer look into that.
Ellana manages to squeeze in a few hours of sleep before her alarm goes off at 7:30. In the shower, she remembers the panic-stricken email she sent to Fen’Harel and cringes at how utterly whiny and pathetic she must have sounded. She hasn’t survived two years broke in Orlais by tolerating any kind of weakness.

But there’s nothing she can do about it, so she resolutely stuffs her embarrassment in the back of her mind and focuses instead on preparing for class. She has Intro to Algebra and Composition 101 today.

Algebra is first, at 9:30 in Aeducan Hall. The classroom is huge, styled like an amphitheater, with long tables instead of desks. Ellana sits in the first row by 9:15, pulling out paper for notes and organizing her pens and sharpening her pencils. She knows she must look so painfully eager, but math is her weakest subject and she doesn’t want to fail her first semester.

(The dream lingers in the back of her mind.)

“Oh, you are adorable,” says a familiar voice, matched with long footsteps.

Ellana looks up to see a tall, dark-skinned man placing a very large iced coffee on the podium. Peacock green silk shirt and slacks, perfectly waxed mustache, white teeth bared against dark skin.

It’s her advisor from freshman orientation.

“Good morning, Dr. Pavus,” she says. She looks down at her schedule to double-check if she’s in the right class. Sitting in on a theoretical math class would probably feel like last night’s dream in real life. “Is this . . . Intro to College Algebra? Or am I in the wrong room? I think a Professor Kondrat is supposed to teach this?”

“Yes, yes,” says Dr. Pavus. “Oghren couldn’t make it. I’m filling in. Look at you, you’ve got three different highlighters! And Maker, how the hell are you so perky this early in the morning?”

“It’s early?”

Back home she would have woken before the sunrise to help feed the chickens, and the habit has never left her, even when she tried desperately to squeeze in a few hours of sleep between shifts. Pavus turns around and tests markers on the board before writing his name with a beautiful flourish.

“Don’t tell me you’re a morning person. And here I thought we were going to get along.” But there is a smile in his tone even if she can’t see his face.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who wastes a perfectly good morning lazing around.” Ellana isn’t sure if she should be teasing her professor this early or even at all, but Pavus seems to be someone who likes a push-and-pull so she takes the risk.

“Lazing!” He spins around, mouth open, but his eyes shine. “It takes time to look this good, I’ll have you know. Lots of work and effort.”

Before she can open her mouth and something undoubtedly flirtatious and foolish comes out (it doesn’t look like it takes you any effort at all), Krem walks into class with two coffees from the student union.

“You left really early,” he says. “You didn’t think you’d get lost, did you? We only toured this
“I wanted to get a good seat,” she lies, taking the cup and smelling the cinnamon and vanilla wafting from the lid. It’s scary how well Krem can read her, despite only knowing her for a few days.

“Don’t bother, she clearly doesn’t need it,” says Dr. Pavus. “She’s not like us lesser humans.”

Ellana grins. Krem slides into the seat beside her and pulls out his own notebook and freshly sharpened pencils because the both of them are studious nerds.

“Oh, that is precious,” sighs Dr. Pavus. “I haven’t taught freshmen in so long, I’ve quite forgotten how eager they are. I can’t decide if I dread or long for the moment you roll into class with a minute to spare still clad in your pajamas and taking notes on your hand with a borrowed pen.”

Soon the other students start filing in. They don’t get a moment for introduction, however, before Professor Pavus begins.

“Good morning, my eager freshmen! Heads off your desks, everyone. If I can’t sleep in, then neither can you. I’m Dr. Dorian Pavus. I teach experimental physics to graduate students, but Professor Kondrat had to check into rehab at the last minute and I pulled the short straw. If I go too fast for you children, just raise a hand and I’ll try to dumb myself down as much as possible. Clear off your desks, it’s pop quiz time! I need to see just how much your high school education failed you.”

Her insides seize up, but judging by the looks on everyone else’s faces, hers aren’t the only ones.

“Good morning, my fresh-faced daisies!”

The composition professor is a dwarf with a nose that looks like he has broken it more than once, and thick copper hair in a ponytail that could rival the stoner in the back row. He sits on top of the desk, the only way he could be eye level with everyone else, and gives them all a sunny grin. Unlike Ellana’s giant amphitheater classroom in Math, Varric’s class takes place in a small, tucked away room in the library with plenty of windows, with space enough for only thirty desks.

“I’m Varric. Professor Varric to anyone who’s still carrying the memory of their mother’s handprint if they spoke too rudely to an elder. But for the love of the Maker, no one call me Professor Tethras unless you want me to deliberately fail you.”

Ellana’s lips twitch.

“Most of you probably don’t know how to piece together a sentence without screwing it up, but that’s okay. That’s what the grammar textbook I made you buy is for. I don’t teach grammar.”

“What do you teach, then?” says one obnoxious student in the back.

“After class I might teach you how to dance with my crossbow,” Varric retorts. “But mostly I teach storytelling. Everyone needs storytelling. Stories entertain, get you laid, get you out of speeding tickets, and in this class, will get you an A.”

He claps his hands. “All right. Since everyone here is a stranger to each other, you’re the perfect audience for stories. Find a partner and tell them three weird things about yourself. Then pick your favorite and your partner must write it as a story. You’ve got thirty seconds to find someone. Go!”

Ellana whips her head around, hoping to the Creators that she won’t get stuck with the smartass in
the back. The woman sitting next to her has the same panicked, lost expression.

“Partners?” she asks, in a heavy accent.

“Partners,” Ellana agrees.

The relief in the woman’s face is almost comical. Ellana scoots her desk closer to the woman and brings out a sheet of paper.

“I’m Ellana,” she says, holding out her hand.

“Cassandra.” The woman shakes her hand with a stone grip that could easily break fingers.

“So, three things,” Ellana muses. “Who would like to go first.”

“I would,” says Cassandra. “I . . . am not very social. I would like to get this over with.”

“Okay. Fire away.”

Cassandra takes a moment to think. Ellana uses this time to give the woman a studying glance. She’s older than the freshmen by a lot, perhaps in her mid-to-late thirties. A deep scar mars the left side of her cheek and her black hair is cut close to her head. She’s tall and muscular and dressed in modest jeans and a thin sweater.

She looks like she could play for the Chargers if she really wanted to.

Even so, there is a striking beauty to her that is hard to look away from.

“I was born in a car between two cities in Nevarra,” Cassandra starts. “I have seven middle names. I was married once when I was very young, but it didn’t last.”

Ellana copies this down dutifully on her sheet of paper, unsure if Varric is the type of teacher to pull surprise quizzes or not.

“Seven? That’s a lot.”

Cassandra’s mouth is a grim line. “Yes. One for each godmother. It’s quite exhausting. And you?”

Ellana thinks for a moment. Everything about her childhood is generally weird to humans, especially city humans whose only exposure to nature is the park down the street. So on one hand, this assignment is laughably easy. On the other hand, what she chooses to share depends on how many questions she feels like fielding afterward.

“When I was a kid, I helped out at the halla stable. I named all the halla and talked to them like people because I thought one of them might be the elven goddess Ghilan’nain,” she starts and Cassandra’s eyes climb up at the mention of Ghilan’nain, so she dials back the religion aspect. “I almost set fire to someone’s barn making fireworks out of shotgun shells. And I got lost in a corn maze for almost three hours once and my neighbor had to find me by riding on his elk.”

She almost spilled the secret about her scholarship, but decided not to at the last second. Being Dalish makes her enough of a freak as it is without adding her mysterious benefactor to it.

“You’ve had a very . . . lively childhood,” Cassandra says with a pointed brow. “I take it you’re not a city elf?”

“She’s Dalish,” comes Varric’s voice as he walks up the row of desks beside them. “That much is
obvious from the vallaslin on her forehead.”

Maybe it’s two decades of unfair stereotypes, but Ellana is surprised that a dwarf knows anything about her culture, even if he lives on the surface.

Cassandra’s eyes go a little wide. “Oh! Forgive me, I had not realized. I’ve never . . . had the honor of meeting a Dalish before.”

“Not many people have,” says Varric, eyeing her. For a moment Ellana fears that he’s going to do that thing where non-Dalish treat her like an exotic spice, like she’s going to excite their lives just by existing. It happened all the time in the clothing store she worked at. Customers would make a beeline to her for clothing advice, just for the experience of talking to her.

Instead, Varric leans up against Cassandra’s desk like he owns it, and she not-so-subtly draws her arm away from the elbow he’s propped up. “So, did you name those halla you talked to, and which one was your favorite?”

“. . . Sarel. He was skittish. It took a long time to get him to trust me.”

“Is that why you have Ghilan’nain’s vallaslin on your forehead?”

Ellana stares at him, stunned. “That’s part of the reason. How do you know about Dalish vallaslin?”

“I’m a writer,” says Varric. “I make it my job to know lots of things about lots of different kinds of people.”

They spend the rest of class sketching out the written story of their fact. Ellana retells how she found Sarel caught in a bear trap and the ensuing months of carefully coaxing out his trust until he developed the annoying habit of breaking out of his stall just to show up in her backyard.

Cassandra lists all the godmothers who bear her namesake and how they have shaped her personality and history.

After class, Varric escorts her down the hallway.

“So, you’re holding out on us,” he says rather casually.

Ellana looks down at him. “Excuse me?”

“With the stories. A Dalish elf at Skyhold University? There’s definitely a story there, and the fact that you wouldn’t share it earlier just means it’s more interesting to me.”

Ellana can’t help but smile. An insatiable curiosity compels him to ask, rather than the snobbish surprise that a Dalish could even get into college.

“There is, and it’s certainly weird,” she says. “But I’m not ready to share it just yet.”

Varric holds up a hand. “Say no more. Certain stories require a level of trust. I’m willing to wait.”

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: I made it!
Dear Fen’Harel

My first week was excellent. I risk jinxing myself, but I’ll say that classes are easy. Except for Math, but that’s because Dr. Pavus hasn’t taught freshmen in years and he’ll spiral into advanced math before dumbing himself down once he sees our blank looks. But I’m not the only one who struggles, so it doesn’t bother me.

Art History is fascinating, but Dr. Sten looks like he would kill you in your sleep if you ever showed up late. He’s the first Qunari I’ve ever met without horns and for some reason that just makes him even scarier. He’s very passionate about preserving ancient art though. The first day in class he showed us a Pre-Chantry tevine statue with missing arms and said, like someone commenting on the weather, “Someone once tore the arms off this goddess. It’s unfortunate that I will never have the opportunity to remove his arms in kind.”

And then he just changed the slide like nothing had happened.

Varric, my composition professor, is having us write a story about the most interesting fact about us as chosen by our partners.

So here are three interesting things about me that I didn’t share with my partner:

1. I’m a little allergic to halla but that didn’t stop me from working at my best friend’s halla farm. I just washed my hands a lot and sneezed constantly.
2. I was the only person in town to complete the library’s Summer Reading Challenge every year since I was twelve. But, granted, most Dalish don’t have the time or desire to read very much, and our library was smaller than our diner, so I didn’t have much competition.
3. I once snuck out of my house and walked for three hours just to see a movie at the drive-in theater. It was held at one in the morning because it had a ton of violence and nudity and the elders banned it, but one of my classmates snuck it in.

So there you have it. The mystery of Ellana unveils a little bit at a time.

Yours,

Ellana

Three weeks into school, a very large Qunari sits down at the table where Ellana and Krem are grabbing lunch. Krem has made one last dash for the bread bowls before the buffet runs out, leaving Ellana alone with the intruder. His horns cast long shadows on the table, and deep scars peek out from underneath an eyepatch. A literal eyepatch. Like a pirate. He makes the chair he sits on look like it belongs in a kindergarten classroom.

I have officially found someone scarier looking than Dr. Sten, Ellana thinks.

Her spoon hovers over her mac and cheese. “Um. Hello?”

“Coach!” Krem sets his tray down beside Ellana. “What are you doing here?”

The coach grins, his canine teeth sharp as a wolf’s. “I heard they were serving some crème brûlée so I came to investigate.”

He throws his head back and laughs while Krem rolls his eyes.
“Are these stupid puns ever going away?”

“Not ever,” says the coach. He turns to Ellana and sticks out a hand that could cover her entire face. “I’m The Iron Bull. I coach the hockey team.”

“Ellana Lavellan.” Her entire hand disappears in his grip when she shakes his, but he is careful not to crush her fingers. “The Iron Bull? That’s your real name?”

“Yeah.” He says matter-of-factly. “It’s cool.”

“It’s ridiculous, but he won’t tell anyone his real name. It’s not even listed in the faculty directory online,” says Krem.

“This is my real name,” says the Iron Bull, but he’s grinning. “Don’t be jealous because your parents named you after a fancy dessert.”

Krem’s eyes turn skyward, but a smile twitches in the corners of his lips.

“So, how are classes?” the coach asks. “Got any asshole professors? You doing your homework?”

Ellana’s eyes slide to Krem, their dorm situation like the pink druffalo in the room.

“Yes, Dad,” says Krem. “I do all my homework, I take notes in class, I study in the library. I’m not an idiot, you know.”

Ellana bites her lip and looks back down at her mac and cheese. It’s none of her business if Krem doesn’t want to say anything.

“I don’t give scholarships to idiots,” says Iron Bull almost dismissively, as if the notion of Krem’s stupidity could never cross his mind. “Just seeing if you’re having a good time, if you’re making friends.” He nods to Ellana.

“I don’t have friends,” says Krem, “I’m bribing her to sit with me.”

“With gummy bears,” Ellana adds, deadpan.


He pats the table before leaving.

“So he’s . . . nice,” Ellana says, fishing around for something to fill the silence.

“He scouted me back in high school,” says Krem. “He arranged for my scholarship so I could be here.”

The situation sounds eerily familiar.

“You didn’t tell him,” she says. “I think that’s something he’d probably want to know.”

“He would go ballistic,” Krem confirms. “But . . . he’s gone through enough for me. I don’t want him to put his job at risk because of something stupid like my dorm room.”

“It’s not stupid. It’s outright discrimination! And what do you mean, he’s gone through enough?”

He looks away. “That eyepatch? He got it defending me. I was the only so-called “girl” on the team,
and I’m good. The opposing team didn’t like that I beat them, so they ambushed me in the parking lot after everyone left.” A grin peeks out in the corners of his mouth. “But Iron Bull was there, waiting to talk to me about college, and he saw what they were up to and . . . well, you’ve seen him. He took on four of them at once. But someone elbowed him in the eye and he ended up losing it.”

“Holy shit,” Ellana says, because how else can you react to a story like that?

“He was chatting me up about playing for Skyhold while we were sitting in the emergency room. He didn’t care about who or what I was, he just admired my ability. When I told him that there was no way I could afford to go to college, especially to Skyhold, he got me a full ride. I owe him a lot as it is.”

“I get it. I’m sort of in the same position.” She blurts it out without meaning to.

“You are?”

Krem’s face looks so hopeful at the prospect of someone who understands that Ellana can’t really back down, even though this will make her even more bizarre.

“My scholarship is not really a scholarship so much as like a mysterious benefactor feeling sorry for me and paying for all of my shit?”

For a long, silent moment Krem just stares at her with his head cocked to the side. “. . . What?”

So, Ellana explains it the best she can. Hell, she doesn’t even understand it herself.

“You don’t know this person?”

“Nope. I’ve never seen him before. Or maybe I have, but he was just some random person in the library and I didn’t pay attention.”

“And you’ve never talked to him or interacted with him?”

“Not that I know of.”

“And he just saw you reading in the library and decided to pay your way through college because . . . he felt bad for you?”

Ellana shrugs. “I swear to the Creators, Krem, I’m not making this up.”

“It sounds sketchy as hell.”

“Oh, yeah. I know. And I’m still kind of waiting for it all to blow up in my face, but for now it’s working out. I just know what if feels like owing someone and not wanting to make it any worse.”

“And if he turns out to be part of the Carta and expects you to repay your debts, what then?”

“Well . . . I better live it up these next four years, huh.”

Krem laughs and lifts up his soft drink. “To the next four years, then.”

“To the next four years.”

Or semester. Or week. Who the hell knows if or when Fen’Harel might pull the plug on this whole ordeal. However, if Ellana didn’t like living outside her comfort zone, she would have never left the Dales.
Once Ellana gets acquainted with the library, she never wants to leave. There are a hundred hidden corners with squishy chairs or couches stashed away, and even though sometimes it’s a pain in the ass to find one that’s not occupied by an amorous couple, she loves it.

Krem has got her obsessed with this insanely long, complex fantasy series where each book is roughly as thick as her own head, and in between homework and class and eating, Ellana spends a lot of time holed up in a corner reading them. Sometimes Krem will join her when he’s not gadding about with his fellow Chargers, all of whom now routinely crash their study sessions, which have to be held out in the Quad because of how noisy they all are.

But today sunlight streams in the window behind her, a good book lay open in her lap, and the quiet of the library soothes her, just like it had in Orlais, when she had to steal snatches of precious free time in between the revolving door of her three jobs.

Even back in the Dales the amount of work required for an average day exhausted Ellana more often than not. This is the most amount of free time she’s ever had since before her parents died.

A rush of affection and gratitude compels her to slide out her phone and type a message to Fen’Harel.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: I am going to marry this library

Dear Fen’Harel,

The library here alone is worth enough to confess any information that you ever wanted about me. My favorite color. My most embarrassing childhood nickname. Why I left the Dales. You name it.

Except you won’t, because you never respond and all the emails are probably sitting in your spam box.

And also I can’t shake the idea of you as some insane Carta mafia head who’s just waiting for me to graduate so you can turn me into a drug mule until I repay my debt. So you’re not getting any seriously revealing information from me anyway, haha.

I will tell you my favorite color, though, but only because this library is just so amazing.

It’s green. A deep, lush green, like grass in afternoon sunlight. (Varric is getting us to experiment with poetry. I’m not very good at it.)

Yours,

Ellana.
she sends to Fen’Harel. Her emails would sound a lot different if she were sending them to Abelas, but talking to Fen’Harel is like talking to a wax dummy. Not even the slightest hint about who or what he might be colors her perception of him. She could imagine anything she wanted, but she doesn’t. Ellana likes the anonymity of him; it’s relaxing.

Still, obviously she holds herself back. Her messages to Fen’Harel don’t sound anything like the texts she sends to Alistair. The most important parts of her personality she withholds for safe-keeping.

Until around the end of Harvestmere, when she types out her email in shaking fingers, and all hope of careful neutrality goes out the window.

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Sorry, but I'm not sorry.

Dear Fen’Harel,

I don’t know if the University emails you about me or what, since this isn’t a traditional scholarship. But I thought I would just warn you that today I decked an asshole in the cafeteria and my hands are still shaking and my knuckles are bruised and swelling and I would do it again in a fucking heartbeat.

I haven’t talked much about Krem, my roommate and good friend. I don’t have a problem with Krem. Krem is an amazing roommate, always funny and respectful and doesn’t keep crazy hours or fuck everybody in our room like I hear others doing. But Krem is living in a girls' dorm as a girl when he so clearly identifies as a guy. And he is never creepy or weird or uncomfortable, but I can see him bending backwards every day to make sure that I’m not freaked out by him and he can never fucking relax in his own room.

This is bullshit. Apparently his request for a transfer was denied based on his birth records and I’m just

I don’t know. I’m beyond pissed, even though I feel like I shouldn’t have the right to be this fucking angry when it’s not adversely affecting me but whatever. It’s been going on and Krem won’t speak up about it and if he wants to deal with it, that’s his business.

But today in the cafeteria some scum-sucking shem picked a fight with Krem, apparently because Krem’s a better field hockey player. He just walked up out of nowhere and started screaming at him and called Krem

No. You know what, I'm not repeating that. But it was cruel enough to make Krem freeze up and to make me drive my fist into his miserable fucking face.

Anyway, I’m on probation. I don’t know if that affects anything with you or not, but I figured at least you should hear it from me.

If you’re expecting an insightful email where I reflect on my actions and decide to mature, then I’m sorry. That guy was a jackass and Krem deserved better and I’ll do it again tomorrow if he even looks at Krem the wrong way again.
Yours,

Ellana

For a week that email haunted her. What if Fen’Harel took her probation seriously and rescinded his money? What if all the swearing offended him and he took away her scholarship? What if he didn’t like her unrepentant attitude and thought perhaps she didn’t deserve her scholarship – and took it away?

Even though her entire future has always depended on the whim of his charity, it never felt as fragile as it did now.

For a week Ellana couldn’t open her inbox. And when she finally did, the only emails sitting in her inbox were coupons from the late-night diner she and Alistair used to frequent.

Fen’Harel had said nothing.

Maybe he didn’t read them after all.

She doesn’t know who to thank, luck or the Creators or fate, but Varric witnessed the entire scene, from the slur hurled at Krem to the way the human’s face snapped to the side like a meat sack (according to his flowery prose) when Ellana hit him.

When she is inevitably pulled into the campus security office, Varric is right there with her, written statements from various student witnesses in hand.

“You’ve got a lot more to worry about than a case of instigated assault,” he points out to the campus police. “First of all, the hate speech is going to cause more public outcry than the elf punching. Secondly, you have a human who clearly designs himself male living in an all girls dorm because of his birth certificate, never mind that he’s on the boys’ hockey team. That’s a hell of lawsuit waiting to happen right there, not to mention a shit ton of negative press. Does Coach Bull even know about this?”

Ellana and Krem can only nod along and stare in awe at someone as short as Varric so angry he’s practically foaming at the mouth and making the Qunari police officer lean instinctively back.

Needless to say, the man who spat the slur at Krem gets put on probation, kicked off the team, and no charges are pressed on Ellana.

“You’re like a knight in shining armor,” she tells Varric on their way out. “That was amazing.”

“Don’t even, kid,” says Varric, waving a dismissing hand. “I just like having the upper hand in all things. If anyone’s amazing, it’s you. Goddamn, looking at you I never expected you to just haul off and deck that guy! I’m going to start calling you the Inquisitor.”

It’s by far not the first time that Ellana has ever decked a person, but she tries to keep the details her of rougher childhood years under wraps now that all the witnesses are conveniently stuck back in the Dales.

“Why Inquisitor?”
“From that movie, The History of Thedas? Nobody expects the Inquisition!” Varric says with a horribly fake Orlesian accent. “No?” he says to her blank look. “Andraste’s tits, did you grow up under a rock? Everyone’s seen that movie.”

“Actually, the Dalish live in treehouses without any electricity,” Ellana deadpans, remembering one of the more outlandish rumors she encountered in Orlais. “What’s a movie?”

Varric chuckles. “I’ll let you borrow it sometime. It’s the perfect movie to quote from.”

“Honestly, Varric, what you did for me . . . ” Ellana swallows. “I don’t know how I could ever thank you or repay you.”

Varric gives her a speculative look. “I didn’t do it so you would feel like you owed me,” he says. “Buuuut . . . if you’re feeling that way, then we can head over to the café and you can share your story over a cappuccino, eh?”

For weeks Varric has been sniffing around for hints about her story with less and less subtlety. It’s become a bit of a game for them, where Varric will offer increasingly outrageous explanations for Ellana to confirm or deny.

“I suppose you’ve earned it,” she says.

If Varric hadn’t proven trustworthy before, he certainly has now. And he would definitely get a kick out of how weird it is.

There are three coffeeshops on campus and Varric takes her to one with a deck with an overlook of the rushing river thousands of feet below. They carry their coffee to the back corner table.

“This is going to sound really weird,” she warns him.

“I’m counting on it.”

She launches into her story, trying to remember tips that Varric has given the class for telling a good story. She sets the scene in the library, does her best impression of Abelas’s flat, joyless tone, describes her deep skepticism and fragile hope.

“And well . . . here I am?” she ends, shrugging her shoulders.

“That is a hell of a story, Inquisitor. But we have got to work on your endings,” Varric advises. “So, just to sum up here: your entire ride is being paid by a mysterious benefactor that you’ve never met before who calls himself Fen’Harel – “

Something in Varric’s face shifts, a realization dawning, for brief moment before he buries it away just as quickly as it came.

“Do you know who it is?” Ellana asks.

“I wish!” Varric says. “Honey, I may know a lot of people, but you’re not exactly giving me much to go off of. It’s just weird, you know, what he calls himself, considering you’re Dalish.”

“It is,” she agrees.

“Do you think he reads your emails?”

“No. I told him about what happened with Krem and he never responded. But he never responds to anything I send him, so that’s nothing new.”
“Hmmm.” Varric rubs his chin. “Well, you were right. It’s a weird-ass story. I might have to use it somewhere.”

“As long as I get some kind of writing credit.” She sighs theatrically. “But now that you know, I suppose I’ve lost all my mystery.”

“Oh, we haven’t even gotten started. This was just a warm up. The real story is why you left the Dales in the first place.”

“Well,” Ellana says, sitting back. “You’re not getting that one for a long time.”

Varric mirrors her pose. “I’m a patient man. I’ll just wait until you punch somebody else.”

The weather turns a bit nippy, but that doesn’t stop Ellana from bundling up and dragging Krem to the Quad to finish Dr. Pavus’ homework problems.

“Are all Dalish elves as obsessed with the outside as you are?” he grumbles, buttoning his coat.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Ellana says. “Look at the leaves. They’re gorgeous.”

“The wind is blowing! It’s cold!”

“It’s smells so good! Suck it up, Krem, or I’ll tell Coach Bull how much of a crybaby you are.”

They settle under a tree with leaves that hang like jewels and finish up Math homework before class tomorrow morning. The problem set ends up distracting Krem from his whining and they make good progress right up until a large shadow looms over them.

Ellana looks up to see Iron Bull, glaring down at them from a ridiculous height and looking piss-in-your-pants terrifying.

“You’ve been living in a girl’s dorm, you little shit, and you didn’t tell me?” he booms.

Ellana swallows, feeling like she got caught by the village Scary Dad who doesn’t mind giving ass-whippings to kids that aren’t his, even though she hasn’t done anything wrong.

“I told you, Ellana,” says Krem, completely unfazed. “He’s like Maferath – call his name and he appears.”

“Krem,” Iron Bull says warningly, and there is no trace of his usual joking demeanor.

Krem juts his chin out. “I didn’t want to complain, Coach. I was getting it resolved myself.”

“Complain?” Iron Bull throws his eyes skyward. “Goddamn it, Krem. Living in the wrong dorm because of some outdated, humiliating policy is a little different from having your professor bitch about your works cited page.”

“You do enough for me as it is! I don’t want your job at risk because of where I sleep at night. Ellana’s a great roommate. My situation isn’t . . . horrible.”

“Roommate!” Bull exclaims, looking over at her. “I thought she was your girlfriend!”

Krem goes red in the face while Ellana cackles. “No!”
“Look, they’re not going to fire me – I’m tenured. And no one else is crazy enough to coach you rough-and-tumble bastards anyway. But I thought you trusted me enough to tell me about shit like this. I shouldn't have to hear about it from Varric Tethras.”

The hurt in his voice is enough to make Krem visibly squirm. “That’s not why I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re an idiot.” Iron Bull relaxes. “Don’t worry. Between Varric and me, we’ll get it resolved. But if anyone else gives you any crap about who you are, you tell me. Immediately. Or . . . I’ll bench you.”

Krem lets out a bark of laughter. “Right. Bench your best player. I’d like to see you try.”

Iron Bull turns his one eye onto Ellana. “Has anyone ever taught you how to fight?”

“Um,” Ellana says, thinking back to the stupid scuffles she used to get into as a kid. “Not really. I kind of just . . . learned by doing?”

“You should stop by the field after practice. I’ll show you how to throw a few punches. You’re lucky you didn’t break your hand on that bastard’s face.”

Two weeks later, Ellana helps Krem pack up his belongings and move into a dorm with a fellow teammate named 'Stitches'. Apparently, everyone on the Chargers has stupid nicknames and Stiches is in pre-med.

“It kind of sucks to move out,” Krem says. “I mean, I’m glad I’m getting acknowledged for being a dude, but I’m going to miss being roommates.”

“We still have class together,” Ellana points out. “Too bad we can’t move into the co-ed dorm together.”

Krem gives her a crooked smile. “We’d have to be married for that.”

“I’m willing to get a marriage of convenience if you are,” she jokes.

“If Stitches is that much of a shitty roommate, I might consider it.”

“Or whoever I’m rooming with,” Ellana says somewhat darkly. “They haven’t given me any information on her. She could be a complete psychopath.”

“Well, my dorm’s on the first floor, so if she tries to murder you, just crawl through my window. We’ll beat her up with a hockey stick.”

“. . . that’s oddly reassuring.”

Ellana likes to stay positive. That’s how she got the courage to move out of the Dales and to survive three low-paying retail jobs that tried their hardest to drive her insane. She tells herself that her roommate will be awesome; someone who is quiet but sarcastic and likes to study and read a lot. Someone who’s essentially the girl version of Krem. (She misses Krem. A lot.)

The Saturday after Krem moves out, Ellana comes back in from getting her morning coffee to see a girl surveying her open suitcase, a tablet and stylus balanced in her hand like a clipboard and pen.
“Toiletries . . . check. Phone charger . . .” she peers closer into the suitcase. “Hold on. Phone charger . . . don’t tell me I left it behind!” She bends over and starts digging through the zip-up pocket.

Ellana checked her watch. 7:30. Most of her classmates can’t form coherent sentences for at least another three hours.

“Good . . . morning?” she says.

The girl turns around and her eyes widen. “Oh! Good morning. You must be Ellana Lavellan.”

The accent hits Ellana first, all rolling r’s and crisp consonants. It’s a gentler version of Cassandra’s. “Guilty. Your accent . . . is that Antivan?”

“Ah. Yes. Your tattoos . . . Dalish?”

“Yes.”

Most people usually stare when they first meet her, either because seeing a Dalish elf at university is as likely as seeing a bog unicorn, or because they think her tattoos are cool. But this girl barely spares it a second glance and sticks her hand out and Ellana shakes it.

“Josephine Montilyet, your new roommate. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Her eyes are gold, like an antique wedding ring. Ellana’s never seen eyes that color and now she’s the one staring.

“Ellana Lavellan, but you already knew that.”

Josephine rifles through her clipboard and pulls out a sheet of paper. “Here is a sort of . . . get-to-know-you survey I compiled. I thought it might make the transition easier if we knew each other’s habits. Then we can go over each other’s answers.”

“That’s efficient.” Ellana takes the paper and sits at her desk.

The first questions are the basics, like birthdays and major and coffee vs tea. Then it gets into hobbies, favorite movies, pet peeves, what time Ellana goes to bed and wakes up, her expected GPA at the end of the semester and her class schedule.

Ellana scribbles the answers down dutifully.

Meanwhile Josephine unpacks her suitcase with her trusty checklist, storing everything neatly in her nightstand, dresser, and closet. Ellana can tell right away that she’s neater even than Krem, who redefined the term “neat freak” and killed stereotypes for college dudes everywhere. Ellana doesn’t live like a pig either, but she’s clearly going to have to up her game to stay on Josephine’s level.

“Finished,” Ellana says. “Do you want to look at these over breakfast? The cafeteria should be open by now.”

“That sounds wonderful. But, uh, we might have to make a pit stop,” Josephine winces. “I think I left my charger back in my old dorm?”

Ellana grins.

When they compare schedules, it turns out Josephine has been in Ellana’s Art History class the entire
“How did we not see each other?” Josephine bemoans over Orlesian toast.

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t look away from those slide shows for a second. I don’t want to know what Dr. Sten would do to me if he thought I wasn’t paying attention.”

Josephine giggles. “I take more notes in his class than any other for the same reason! I have pages and pages of them.”

The more Ellana scans over Josephine’s answers, the less she worries about her new roommate. According to her elegant, loopy cursive, Josephine is a sophomore studying political science and has never made less than a 4.0 in her life. She wakes up promptly at six-thirty every morning, doesn’t drink or stay up later than ten on a weekday, loves old black-and-white romance movies, swimming, and tea of all kinds.

“I will also eat chocolate until I puke,” Josephine adds. “Leliana sends me these candies from Carastia and I would eat them until they killed me if I could.”

“Leliana?” Ellana asks.

“My old roommate. She ditched me to study abroad.” Though Josephine smiles, there’s something sad in it. “I thought I would be fine living by myself this semester, but . . . I got unexpectedly lonely, so I put in a request for a roommate for next semester. I didn’t think I’d get one so soon! What happened to your roommate?”

“They – uh – felt more comfortable in a different dorm,” Ellana hedges, not wanting to out Krem, even if Josephine seemed so nice.

“I see.” Josephine gives her an odd look, but doesn’t push further.

On the surface, Josephine is everything that Ellana usually hates about humanity -- obscenely rich (her parents are honest-to-gods nobility), obsessed with clothes and decorating, and totally oblivious about her model good looks – and yet somehow it’s impossible to hate her. (To be fair, the microwave and coffee machine she smuggled into the dorm have earned her many brownie points.)

There’s nothing constructed or insincere in Josephine’s kindness, and trust her, Ellana has looked. She has scrutinized everything Josephine has said or done for the past week.

For example, when Josephine offers Ellana pieces from her designer wardrobe because the blouse/skirt/diamond necklace would look “adorable!” with whatever worn t-shirt and thrift store jeans Ellana’s wearing – is this some subtle way to telling Ellana how disgusting she looks?

As it turns out, no. Josephine grew up with a younger sister and it’s second nature to share all of her clothes.

“Trust me, it was much better to be generous with my clothes than to have Yvette steal them behind my back.”

(and Ellana looks down in hidden shame, remembering all the jackets and henleys and flannel that she’s swiped from both Alistair and Krem).

It takes some time before Ellana gets comfortable wearing the incredibly expensive pieces that
Josephine foists on her -- and she doesn’t touch her jewelry with a ten-foot pole – and then it becomes an unspoken rule that Ellana can help herself to anything she wants if Josephine can cuddle up in Ellana’s sweatpants and worn t-shirts and stolen flannel.

But the best part of Josephine is that she somehow knows to couch her generosity in a way that doesn’t prickle at Ellana’s pride.

That first afternoon, Josephine decorates her side of the dorm so flawlessly it looks straight out of a catalog. All the fairy lights and gold accents and beautiful framed pictures of beaches and vineyards makes Ellana’s frayed comforter, beat up laundry basket and the stolen cup from the cafeteria that houses her pen collection look frankly pathetic.

Josephine definitely notices, casting a critical eye over Ellana’s side of the room. But she says nothing, and then a week later a deep green velvet comforter comes for her in the mail.

“My parents,” Josephine says with an eyeroll. “They’re constantly sending me things they think I’ve forgotten. But I have no use for this. Would you like it?”

Ellana jerks her fingers away, which have been tracing the delicate gold embroidery that lines the hem.

“I can’t. This is yours and it looks expensive.”

“But I like mine better, and the cost to ship this all the way back to Antiva would be outrageous.” Still sensing Ellana’s reluctance, Josephine shrugs. “You could borrow it, then, until you buy yourself another comforter.”

Borrow. That feels a lot better than taking. She’ll borrow it until she decides to spend some of her stipend on a less shitty comforter. Perhaps when the winter sales hit in a month or so.

Josephine helps take down and fold Ellana’s old comforter and spread the new one on. It looks like a carpet of fresh summer grass and laying on it makes Ellana feel like a princess.

When Ellana takes the garbage out a few days later, she notices the shipping label on the box it came in. Antiva is nowhere on it.

In short, Josephine Montilyet is the shit.

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: I am FREAKING OUT RIGHT NOW

Dear Fen’Harel,

You remember that time that I emailed you at two in the morning in the bathroom because I had a nightmare about sucking at college?

Well, you’ll never guess what time it is right now. Actually, this is timestamped, so you totally will, but you’ll never guess where I’m typing this all out on my phone?
If you said the bathroom, you get a sticker!

Sorry if I sound weird, but finals start tomorrow and I’m freaking the fuck out right now. All but one of my classes is making the final worth half of our grade!

Half!

That means if I could work my ass off and get stellar grades on all my papers and if I bomb the final, I still flunk the class. It’s bullshit! It’s a ton of pressure and I just

Look, I’ve never actually taken a final before, okay? Dalish education is . . . different than everyone else’s. First of all, we didn’t even have finals. One school serviced all the children, all the grades for at least three clans. And all of our teachers were Dalish and none of them had a college education and I’m not saying that they were stupid. Dalish are not stupid. Our curriculum was just limited and it revolved around being Dalish.

Like, math classes revolved more around the worth of our Halla milk and how not to get screwed over by hipster shems who wanted to buy it. And History was all about Dalish history, and how many times we’ve gotten screwed over by the Chantry since the fall of Arlathan. Literature had us analyze Dalish legends and mythology for deeper themes that supported our culture.

Not to mention that a lot of our education is all practical – carpentry, agriculture, welding, animal husbandry, economics.

Dalish education prepared me to live and support myself with as much independence from humans as physically possible. I could totally run away to the Arbor Wilds and live like a hermit in a house I built myself and not starve, if I wanted to.

If I wanted to learn anything outside of that, I had to teach it to myself. And I did. I saved up money to buy books online, I read anything I could get my hands on in libraries, which is supposedly how you met me.

But it did nothing to prepare me for Skyhold. And I cannot stomach the thought of flunking after trying so freaking hard, but I feel like I’m in a race where everyone else got this massive head start and here I am, trying to beat it when I started a hundred yards behind everyone else and my shoes are made of lead.

It’s bullshit.

I think my leg is falling asleep.

Yours,

Ellana.

For the next week, all of Ellana’s free time gets shunted towards studying. She practically lives in the library, rewriting all of her notes, doing extra practice problems in the math textbook, rewatching all of Dr. Sten’s slideshows.

She even out-studies Josephine, who repeatedly begs her to take a break.

“Ellana, come and get some coffee,” her roommate pleads. “You’ve been at it for four hours! You should take a break. Krem and Cassie are both at the coffee shop already.”
“I will,” Ellana says, “after I finish these notes.”

Josephine sighs. “Ellana, you are wearing yourself out. It’s not healthy.”

“It’s temporary, Josie. I’ll be fine once finals are over. Go ahead and meet up with Krem and Cassie, and I’ll join you guys later.”

“Fine. But if I don’t see you for dinner, I’ll have Coach Bull drag you out of here personally.”

Quite a while later, a to-go cup of coffee appears in front of her, pushed across the table by long, tan fingers with a familiar snake ring.

“And here’s a sandwich,” Dr. Pavus adds, setting a white paper bag on the table. “Eat quickly before Wynne finds us and beats me with her cane.”

He leans his chair back and peers around the bookshelf Ellana has sequestered herself behind for the head librarian.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“A little birdie told me that you’re trying to kill yourself via studying.”

Josie. She must be really fed up to find Dr. Pavus.

“So they sent you?”

“I’m your advisor, aren’t I?” Dr. Pavus says, placing his hand over his heart. “It’s my job to advise you, but I didn’t think you’d be this bad, darling. You know, this amount of stress is generally reserved for new parents and graduate students.”

Ellana flushes. “I just want to do well,” she says.

“And why do you think you won’t? By the by, if Wynne ever sees that sandwich we are both going to banned for life and I know how much you love the library.”

Quietly, Ellana opens the bag to find a turkey and cheese on rye, and her small bites turn into barely polite devouring, hunger suddenly flaring up. “I’ve never had a final before,” she admits in between bites. “And I’m not going to live up to expectations that I’m a backwoods Dalish idiot by flunking my first term.”

“Backwoods idiot?” Dr. Pavus scoffs. “Don’t be absurd. Nobody thinks that.”

She gives him a skeptical look. “I know what my stereotypes are. I’m not going to prove any of them right.”

Dr. Pavus folds his fingers under his chin. “I’m Tevine and even though I’ve been a part of this university for a decade, certain professors or scientists refuse to collaborate with me because they think I’ll steal their work for my own and stab them in the back. I also get audited by tax collectors every year to ensure I’m not funneling my money into human trafficking rings. So, I know a thing or two about stereotypes. And the best advice I can give you is to not give a fuck.”

Ellana’s attention snaps from her coffee at the swear word. She opens her mouth to say something and Dorian holds up his hand.
“I know, I know, it’s much easier said than done. Believe me. But stereotypes can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if you’re not careful. For example, you could bomb your finals because you’re stressing and panicking and not getting any sleep or eating, and that’s always a recipe for disaster.”

Ellana drops her gaze back to her coffee. It’s too easy to envision herself doing exactly that next week.

“If you would stop obsessing over other people’s expectations of you for five minutes, you would realize that someone who has received good marks all semester and done all their homework will not have any trouble with the final because they’ve understood the material the whole way through.”

“. . . that makes sense, I guess,” she reluctantly admits.

“I would hope so! You know, we professors don’t design our finals just to screw hapless freshman out of a passing grade. It’s just a final check of your understanding. Well . . . some of us don’t.”

Ellana smiles. “So, you’re saying I should take a break.”

“I’m saying you should stop altogether. You’ve done two months of studying in five days. Go take a nap.”

“But you just gave me coffee.”

Dr. Pavus throws his hands in the air. “Then go hiking or commune with nature or whatever it is that Dalish elves do for fun.”

“Well, there aren’t any elk to have a mud race with, so I’ll have to figure something else out,” she says.

“Excellent. Pack up your things, I’m escorting you out of here. You can’t be trusted.”

Ellana sighs theatrically but secretly she’s relieved to quit. It had started to feel like she’s spinning her wheels anyway, but blind panic drove her on.

“Thank you, Dr. Pavus,” she says as they walk out the library. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I don’t have to do anything, darling, but stay Tevine and die. Now go and relax, and if I have any more reports of you cramming, I’ll flunk you on principle.”

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To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: I AM SO DRUNK RN. Also WTF

Dear Fen’Harel

I passed! I passed all my finals! I passed my first semester!

And I didn’t just pass first semester, I fucking nailed it.

I have all A’s and a motherfucking 4.0.

Sorry for all the cussing, I’m just really godsdamn excited. Holy shit. A 4.0. At SKYHOLD.
Also I’m hella drunk right now. Krem, Josie, Cassie, Varric, and I all hit up a bar downtown called The Hanged Man. It’s sketchy as hell but no one asks for ID so it evens out. Plus everyone knows Varric because he writes all his books in a booth in the corner and practically lives there.

Apparently Varric hangs out with students all the time, since most professors have their syllabuses too far up their ass to have a good time. (His words, not mine.) His most recent batch of student friends all graduated and ditched him, so I think my group of friends are the new substitutes.

I don’t care, cause Varric is awesome! He bailed me out when I bitch-slapped that asshole who called Krem a tranny and he gave me a 102% on my test.

Also he’s paying for everyone’s drinks cause he’s loaded.

Anyway I’m in bed and waiting for the room to stop spinning before I can go to sleep.

So all semester I’ve been wondering, okay? Do you actually read any of this shit? Or they all go straight to spam and these emails are like yelling into the void? I mean, I punched a dude out and you never responded. I have like, two separate massive panic attacks and you never responded. I’m drunk off my ass and got a 4.0 and you’ll never respond, not even to congratulate me or tell me how to get rid of a hangover.

It’s cold, dude. It doesn’t make any sense. How can you gift me with this amazing opportunity and yet not give a single shit about my life? What the fuck?

Whatever.

Ellana

P.S. I went through the whole stupid email and fixed all the spelling mistakes I fat fingered because I’m still super drunk so you better fucking appreciate it okay?

Ellana wakes up with her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth and a killer headache.

“If you need to vomit, there’s a trashcan beside your bed.”

Ellana cracks an eye open to see Cassandra sitting at her desk, flipping through one of Josephine’s travel magazines.

“There’s a bottle of painkillers and some water on your nightstand,” Cassandra continues, her voice barely a whisper and yet it still hurts.

It takes a moment for her words to process and then Ellana is tearing open the bottle and chugging the water.

“What are you doing here?” Ellana manages to croak.

“I knew you would need someone,” Cassandra says, flipping over a page. “You drank quite a bit last night. I’m impressed. Usually that kind of capacity is reserved for someone older.”

“I grew up on . . . Dalish moonshine,” Ellana whispers. She closes her eyes, willing the room to stop spinning. “How’s Josie?”

“Still sleeping. She also drank more than I expected, but Antivans are liberal with their wine and they start at a young age. I highly suggest you do the same. I’ll be here in case you need an
ambulance called.”

“Love you, Cassie,” Ellana mumbles and then settles back into her pillow and sleeps.

When she wakes up a second time, the sun streams through the curtains and it doesn’t kill her. Josie and her shampoo caddy are gone. Cassandra is reading a different book.

“Feeling better?” she asks.

“Much. Though my mouth tastes awful,” Ellana says.

Cassandra nods at the second water bottle resting on the nightstand. As Ellana sips on it, she tries to replay the events of last night.

She remembers Krem teaching her how to play pool. She remembers Cassandra and Varric getting into a heated debate over some book they read. She remembers Josie eating shelled peanuts like they would die out forever the next day.

She remembers laying in this bed, typing on her phone to distract herself from her dizziness and –

Oh. Oh no. Oh Creators.

She dives through the blankets for her phone, and opens up her sent emails. With each paragraph her horror grows until she throws her phone back on the bed with a groan.

“Something the matter?” Cassandra asks.

“I drunk texted someone,” she says which is mostly true.

Her friend chuckles. “I would recommend a shower and some breakfast before making amends.”

So distracted by mentally composing an apology email in her mind, Ellana ends up shampooing her hair twice and skips her face-wash entirely. Whatever. Doesn’t matter. Panic attacks aside, she had a perfect first semester and she desperately wants it to continue.

She doesn’t regret feeling frustrated over Fen’Harel’s total lack of communication, even though Abelas warned her about it. But she does regret the entitled attitude she read in her email, as if Fen’Harel owed her some kind of relationship, despite everything else he is giving her.

And he could have decided to give his charity to someone more grateful or deserving.

But when she opens up her email to apologize, a bolded reply to her drunk email sits in her inbox.

For a second, it feels like her heart has stopped.

Oh fucking Creators, I am fucked, she thinks. But she forces herself to open it.

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: fen_harel@tmail.com
Re: I AM SO DRUNK RN also WTF

Ellana,

This is to reassure you that I do, in fact, read all of your “shit.” You are not screaming into the void. Indeed, you have a rather captive audience for your stories and your humor. I am a busy man and I don’t have the time to reply as I wish, but I always read.

Also, the best cure for a hangover is lots of water, sleep, and honey toast. I bid you a speedy recovery for what is no doubt a painful headache this morning.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

P.S. Congratulations, by the way. Though I must admit, I’ve never shared your doubts about your abilities, and so I didn’t think congratulations were needed.

“Well, fuck me and call me a halla’s uncle,” she whispers.
True to its name, Winter Break gets christened with a massive blizzard that dumps six feet of snow and kills all traffic coming in and out of the university. Even the airlifts and subway transit to and from the mountaintop are out of commission. Everyone is stuck.

“It’ll be at least a week before I can fly back to Antiva,” Josephine moans, huddled on her duvet and wearing both of her Skyhold U sweatshirts. “I could puke at the sight of all this snow!”

Josie doesn’t handle the cold very well. Ellana’s an old veteran, having lived through many a blizzard with only a fireplace and a shit-ton of blankets for warmth. But even she’s getting chilly now that the dorms have lowered the thermostat in an effort to conserve electricity.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Buried Alive

Thanks for the offer for tickets back to the Dales, but a massive blizzard just dumped almost ten feet of snow and no one is getting off the mountain for a while. I don’t mind, actually. Krem and I have been taking on the rest of the Chargers in snowball fights and we made a makeshift sled out of cardboard boxes and duct tape.

Actually, Cassandra taught us that particular trick and she even helped us make them. It took some wheedling, but we finally got her to race us down the hill a few times. (She won every time.)

Besides, I’ve been away from home so long that I’m used to it. Six more months won’t be so long of a wait.

The only real annoying thing about this whole fiasco is Josie, my roommate. Coming from Antiva, she is not used to this kind of climate at all and she is both super pissed at how cold it is and that she can’t get back home to her private beach. I love Josie to death and she’s amazing, but I swear I might choke her if I have to hear her whine about the snow one more time.

I’d say take that ticket money and maybe ship me a few books and a snow jacket, but not even mail is running up here yet. Especially since this blizzard is predicted to bury Ferelden now that it’s had its wicked way with Skyhold. So wherever you are, Fen’Harel, I hope you’re warm and with a happy, quiet roommate because Creators knows I am neither.

Yours,

Ellana

P.S. See how I spent this entire letter pretending that my drunken email fiasco never happened? Let’s keep that up. As much as I appreciate you breaking your vow of silence just to reassure me, I will never live that moment down. It’s going in the Ellana Embarrasses Herself Hall of Fame and trust me, that particular gallery is already full as it is.
Three days in, Josephine and Ellana are huddled in Josie’s twin bed with all the blankets from both of their beds on top, reading. There isn’t much else to do but read, since the internet hasn’t gotten fixed. Ellana has just enough cell reception to send Fen’Harel an email updating him on her snowed-in status, but videos and images take an eternity to load.

“Ugh! That is it!” Josephine yells suddenly, chucking her phone across the room. It bounces harmlessly against the wall and lands in a basket of laundry. “I am transferring to Antiva the second this snow thaws!”

“What happened?” Ellana asks. She has never seen Josie throw a tantrum before, and it’s morbidly fascinating, like hearing a child actor curse.

“The weather update says another storm is coming our way,” Josie explains miserably. “It’s going to drop at least four more inches on us. I am so sick —

“— of this snow,” Ellana finishes for her, flipping the page in her book. “And you’re sick of how dry it makes your hair and it’s a frizzy mess all the time. And you’re running out of your favorite fancy Antivan lotion because your elbows are scaly, and you can’t smell anything because of how dry your nose is and you can’t remember what it feels like to be warm. Did I get it all, or did I miss one?”

It’s not that she doesn’t feel for Josephine. It sucks that the first snow Josephine gets to experience is a full-scale blizzard.

It’s just that the complaining never ends and Josephine refuses to go out sledding or snowball fighting or anything else fun to take her mind off it. It’s almost as if she wants to complain, and that’s not like Josie at all.

A dead silence follows her comments. She looks over at Josephine and sees tears pricking in the corners of her eyes.

Oh shit. What kind of person makes Josephine Montilyet cry? It’s like kicking a puppy.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“I’m sorry, Josie, that was out of line,” Ellana says, inwardly panicking. “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I’m really sorry —

“It’s okay,” Josephine says quietly. “You’re right. I’m complaining too much and in these close quarters it must be really aggravating. I’m just . . . homesick. This is the longest I’ve been away from my family, and I didn’t think I would miss this them much.”

Ellana closes her eyes and wishes Josephine would just punch her in the face. She deserves it.

“You have nothing to be sorry for;” Ellana says. “I didn’t realize. I’m sorry. You can complain all you want to. I know this sucks.”

Josephine turns her gaze back to Ellana. “Weren’t you going home, too? Don’t you miss your family?”

Ellana’s throat goes tight suddenly. “I . . . .”
Being so close to her own family, Josephine has gently and subtly probed Ellana about hers in the attempt to get to know her better. And every time, Ellana has deflected. It’s not that she wants to be mysterious on purpose, it’s just that her family story is like a bucket of ice water on Josephine’s happy, hilariously dysfunctional childhood.

But Josephine has been so open with her, and Ellana still feels like an asshole for earlier, so she swallows and tries to explain in a way that doesn’t make this even more awkward or depressing.

“My parents died when I was eight, so the clan’s kind of my family? I mean, we’re not all related to each other, but they all tried to help raise me. I was kind of a massive asshole for a while, though, and the only person who could put up with me was our Keeper, Istie, so I lived with her until I moved.”

Josephine reaches down and squeezes Ellana’s hand. “That’s awful, Ellana. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“You’re not prying; it’s a normal question. And I do miss my clan, especially Istie. But I got used to missing them a long time ago. It’s different for you.”

Because Josephine is wonderful, she doesn’t say anything more on the topic. Instead she casts her gaze to the view of the snow-covered campus and sighs.

“Next time you and Krem go sledding, take me with you. If I’m to be stuck here, I might as well have some fun.”

By day five, walkways have been dug out between the dorms and the student union/rec center. Unfortunately, none of the coffee shops are working because none of the workers can get up the mountain to work them, but Skyhold has made the arcade and pool tables free to operate until the storms let up.

Ellana, Krem, Josie, and Cassandra all meet up in one of the game rooms to play pool. Smuggled in one of Josephine’s backpacks are the coffeemaker, mugs, and creamer. They plug it in behind the pool table and set Ellana’s backpack in front as a makeshift cover-up, but nothing can dampen the smell of coffee percolating.

However, the only attention it draws are Varric and Dr. Pavus, who wander in the middle of Krem and Ellana’s first game, noses in the air.

“I told you I wasn’t hallucinating,” Dr. Pavus says to Varric. “There is coffee here.”

“What are you two doing here?” Ellana asks.


“I got stuck here,” Dr. Pavus adds flatly. “With him.”

“We were playing Diamondback in the empty coffee shop.”

“I guess we’ve got coffee to spare for two decent professors,” Ellana says, nodding over to the coffee maker. “It’s behind the backpack.”

“As ingenious as your hiding place is,” says Dr. Pavus with an eyeroll, “there’s really no need for it. There’s no one on campus right now to bust you.”
“There’s you.”

“I could keep a secret for a couple of decent students.”

Both professors are deadly when it comes to pool. They soundly beat the combined forces of Ellana, Krem, and Josie twice and high-five each other each time.

“You’re disgusting,” Ellana tells them.

“And you’re a sore loser,” says Varric, grinning. “Third time’s the charm?”

“I’m down,” says Ellana. “Who’s with me?”

Josephine shakes her head. “Count me out. Pool is not my forte.”

“I’ve got my ass beat quite enough, thank you,” says Krem.

“I’ll do it,” pipes up Cassandra.

So far, she’s watched the games with only mild interest, occasionally rolling her eyes whenever Varric does a trick shot and winks at her. She walks up and grabs Krem’s offered pool stick.

“I’ll warn you, it’s been some time since I last played,” Cassandra adds.

“We’ll go easy on you,” says Dorian with a smirk.

“We’ll even give you the first shot,” says Varric.

“How gracious of you,” Cassandra replies, sarcasm making her accent even thicker. She turns to Ellana. “Do you mind if I take the first shot?”

Ellana sweeps her arm at the pool table. “After you, my lady.”

Cassandra bends over the table, takes a moment to adjust her posture, and slides the pool stick between her fingers a couple of times before settling in front of the cue ball. She takes a deep, slow breath, and then her pool stick cracks against the cue ball like a gunshot.

Four balls ricochet into their holes.

Like a sniper, Cassandra steadily sinks each and every ball until there are none left, stopping once only to re-chalk her pool stick.

Dorian’s mouth goes slack.

“Where in the hell did you learn how to play like that?” he demands.

“My brother taught me.”

Meanwhile, Varric’s face looks like Satinalia came early.

“You hustled us,” he says, awestruck.

Cassandra juts her chin out. “I did no such thing. I only said I hadn’t played in a while, not that I wasn’t good at it.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’m not angry. I’m impressed as hell. That was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever witnessed. Maker, if that’s you being rusty, I’d hate to see you on a good day.”
A light blush colors Cassandra’s cheeks. “It’s nothing, just a silly game,” she insists, but there’s a smirk in the corner of her mouth.

Ellana thinks Varric just fell in love.

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To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Second verse, same as the first

Dear Fen’Harel,

We survived the blizzard(s)! The snow finally let up a few days ago, and by then it was pointless for anyone to fly out, so we’ve all been stuck with each other this whole break. Well, Josie left. She misses her family a lot, so even just seeing them for three days was enough incentive for her.

Honestly, it wasn’t so bad. My friends and I ended up throwing a makeshift First Day party at Varric’s apartment, and by then you could get a pizza up the mountain.

I love learning. I loved my classes last semester, I can’t wait for this semester. But honestly I think the best part of coming to Skyhold are my friends. Alistair is great, but I grew up part of a clan, a group, and until now I didn’t realize how lonely I was.

If I still did Elu’melana I would write that down as my own secret to burn in the pyre.

The buffet for this semester includes: Comp 102 with Varric (who would hunt me down if I took it with anyone else), Sociology 101, The Orlesian/Fereldan War, and Dwarven Architecture As Art with Dr. Sten.

I imagine your eyebrows are as high as Josephine’s when she saw my schedule. Yes, Dr. Sten scares the shit out of me. I barely made a peep in that class, but he still noticed me because he approached me after the final and told me about this course and said, and I quote, “You have an appreciation for art. I hope to see you in my next class. Don’t disappoint me.”

It was the scariest conversation I’ve ever had. There’s no way I’m risking not showing up for this class.

Wish me luck!

Yours,

Ellana

More snow follows them during the beginning of that semester, but thankfully nothing like the blizzard from before. Skyhold looks like something from a fairy tale, and Ellana snaps dozens of pictures on her phone and texts them to Alistair. She wishes she could send them to Istie, but her Keeper has refused to update her technology past a cordless phone.

The first week goes relatively peacefully, though her Comparative Religions professor seems cranky
and overwhelmingly concerned with Andrasteism. Ellana voices her concerns to Cassandra in the student lounge that weekend.

“I’ve had Dr. Roderick before,” Cassandra tells her. “He is very . . . devoted to his faith. But in my experience, he is not an unreasonable man.”

“Well, keep your fingers crossed, because he looked at my vallaslin the same way you would if I had walked into a Chantry smoking a joint.”

“That sounds like a hell of a scene. Mind if I steal that?”

Varric appears with two coffees in his hand.

“Sure,” says Ellana. “Knock yourself out.”

“I just might. Let’s see here . . . this one is yours, I believe.” Varric sniffs the lid of one of the cups and hands it to her. “Cinnamon vanilla latte.”

“Thanks, Varric.” Ellana takes a long, grateful sip.

Cassandra perks up, eyeing the other cup in his hand. “Is that one mine?”

Varric barely spares her a glance. “Oh no, Seeker, I only buy coffee for my students. It could have been, but you ditched my expertise in favor of some idiotic adjunct still working on his doctorate. So, this very delicious dark chocolate mocha is mine.”

To further prove his point, he takes a deep sip from the cup and then grimaces. “Andraste’s tits, this is sweet. I might have to toss this one.”

“Toss it!” Cassandra cries. “That’s wasteful. If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.”

“I’m sure you would. Dark chocolate mocha is your favorite. But I stand by my principles, Pentaghast. See you in class, Ellana,” he adds, with a little wave.

Then he tosses the cup into the nearest trash can and walks off.

Cassandra stares at his retreating back in shock. “What has gotten into that lunatic?”

Ellana bites her lip to keep from laughing. “I think you’ve hurt his feelings, actually.”

“I doubt that,” Cassandra says scornfully. “Varric’s just upset he can’t irritate me on a daily basis any longer.”

Like a boy pulling on a girl’s pigtail, Ellana muses.

“I don’t know,” she says. “He seemed pretty let down that first day in class when he realized you weren’t coming.”

“It’s nothing personal! I just wanted to be closer to my next class instead of hoofing it from the library every day.”

“Well, it’s still the first week. You can switch classes if you want.”

“As if!” Cassandra crosses her arms. “I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.”

“I hope you like buying your own coffee,” Ellana says and takes another long, delicious sip of her
Next Tuesday Cassandra appears in class and Varric says not a word, except occasionally a mocha will be resting on the corner of her desk when she arrives.

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: This fucking cold

Fucking Creators, I thought the Dales got cold, but it has NOTHING on Skyhold. I should have known better, this university being on top of a freaking mountain, but I didn’t. I thought a couple sweatshirts and flannel would be fine so I wouldn’t have to buy a coat. (I hate coats. They’re outrageously expensive and feels like I’m wearing a straitjacket).

I was wrong. I was very wrong.

It doesn’t help that the heat in the dorms really sucks because the architecture is so old. Honest to gods, it feels like the windows just suck the heat out like a parasite.

I spend most of the time in the library or the student lounge and I only trudge back to the dorm to shiver under my covers like a street urchin. Josie and I have taken to sharing the bed to conserve heat.

(Oh my gods, when I told Krem that, his eyes glazed over and I just know I’ve hit on some kind of fantasy of his. Unfortunately for him, all we do is gossip through our chattering teeth and clutch each other for warmth.)

Not to mention that none of the showers have hot water because it takes roughly an hour to work up the guts to step into the freezing bathroom.

Yesterday I woke up to see actual frost on the INSIDE of the window. THE INSIDE, FEN’HAREL. And Skyhold charges thousands of sovereigns for room and board? You need to send the sad lawyer to investigate this shit.

In other news, classes are good. I’m getting my homework done early because of all the time I spend in the library. I’m also getting better at pool, since I’ve begged Cassandra to teach me her ways. She hustled Varric over break like a true con artist and it’s now my biggest dream to fuck over some cocky frat boy in a bar. Cassandra has also taught me how to beat the shit out of somebody with a cue stick and she won’t share how she knows this information. But one day Varric and I will get her drunk enough to tell us. One day.

This email is mainly to bitch, since Josie and Cassandra and Krem have all banned me from talking about it. You’re the only person I know that can’t tell me to shut up, so now it’s your turn.

In short, it’s too godsdamn cold.

Yours,

Ellana
A week after Ellana sent that pathetic rant to Fen’Harel, a heavy, sizable box comes in the mail. Ellana almost trips over it on her way to class.

“Josie,” she groans.

Her roommate orders everything online, even shampoo and deodorant, rather than buy it in the Student Union or downtown, simply because she loves getting mail.

Ellana dumps the package on Josie’s bed before dashing off before she is late to Sten’s class and gets subsequently executed for it.

That night when she shuffles back in from the library, the package is sitting on her bed.

“You didn’t open it?” Ellana asks, surprised. Josie rips open packages the second they show up, like a kid on Satinalia.

“Why? It’s addressed to you.”

“It is?”

Ellana inspects the box and sees her name and address typed on a sheet of printer paper and taped to the middle. At first, she thinks maybe Istie sent her a care package, but that only ever happens on her birthday, which is weeks away, and Istie doesn’t own a printer or a computer. Plus, there’s no return address.

“Are you going to open it?” Josie asks, peering over her shoulder.

“I didn’t order anything,” Ellana protests. “What if it’s a bomb or poison or something?”

What if somebody wants to hurt the only Dalish elf on campus? The thought makes Ellana’s hackles rise, but it wouldn’t be the first time Dalish elves were attacked simply for straying into “human” territory.

Josephine presses her ear to the box. “I don’t hear any ticking. If you won’t open it, I will.”

As tempting as that offer is, Ellana couldn’t handle it if something intended for her hurt Josephine, so she takes her dorm key and serrates the tap on the box.

Something white and fluffy peeks out. Ellana slowly teases it out of the box to reveal a . . . down comforter?


The box contains two of these expensive, warm comforters and an envelope containing several sovereign bills and a folded-up note.

It’s typed, just like her address.

Dear Ellana,

A shivering student is not a focused student. I, too, remember cold college winters. Just know that insufficient dorm heat is universal across all campuses. These comforters should keep you and your
roommate from freezing to death. I have also included extra funds for you to purchase a coat. Or several more sweatshirts. I leave the choice up to you and have no doubt that your shrewd-minder shopper Josephine will help you find something warm that doesn’t feel like a straitjacket.

It is only a few more weeks until Spring. Hang in there.

Instead of a signature, it’s signed with a paw print sketched in pen.

Ellana’s draw drops.

It’s too much. Way too much. He’s already paying her tuition, her room and board, her food, plus extra spending money. She didn’t write that email as some passive aggressive way to ask for even more than he’s already given her, just to vent off some steam.

She flips out her phone to email him and finds one already sitting in her inbox. There’s no message, only their addresses and a subject line:

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@tmail.com
Subject: I did not include a return address on purpose, so don’t bother asking where you can ship it back. Everything is non-refundable. Even the money.

She grins and puts her phone away.

Josephine has a wicked gleam in her eye. “Does this mean I get to take you shopping?”

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Thank you

Attached are some pictures of me kicking Krem’s ass in a snowball fight. I’m the one in the new, awesome coat. Krem is the one on the ground crying “uncle.” Just in case you got confused.

Yours,

Ellana

As the weather improves, Ellana’s patience with Dr. Roderick steadily deteriorates. The first few weeks of Comparative Religions was a refresher course of the history of the Chantry and how it spread across Thedas, as if the 85% of Andrastian human students didn’t already know. She bore through this with patience that often ended in gritted teeth and bitten off questions.
The “comparative” part of this class came from analyzing how the Chantry was far superior to any
and all religions it replaced. He spoke very little of any other religion in Thedas, both ancient and
current, and he never talked about the attitudes of other religions towards the Chantry.

Ellana initially fought against this by asking pointed questions about the other religions, which
Roderick would coldly shut down or twist around so he could speak more about Andraste. But after
she asked for a rough estimate on how many people the Chantry killed in their attempts to hijack
other cultures’ religions, he stopped calling on her entirely.

So Ellana took her frustrations to her first major assignment and wrote eight pages comparing
Andraste to Mythal and how the mythology of the elven goddess might have inspired the legend of
Andraste.

The paper came back with a “D” and a note scribbled on the back of her tiny works cited page that
she did not have sufficient sources on her Dalish research.

“Insufficient sources!” she shouted, slamming the paper on the table between her and Krem. “I am a
godsdamn source. How the fuck do I cite myself?”

“It’s bullshit,” Krem agrees. “Why don’t you drop out? You still have two weeks before mid-terms.”

“And give that bastard the satisfaction of never having to deal with me?” Ellana says. “Not a
chance.”

She studies for hours for that stupid midterm, burying herself in books about Andraste, annoying
Cassandra with questions about finer points in their beliefs and she walks out of that test with twenty
minutes to spare and a spring in her step.

What she doesn’t expect is to be held back after class with her test clutched in his hand, ungraded,
and an accusation of cheating.

“What?” Ellana asks, blindsided.

“I don’t know how you did it,” Roderick says, “but you must have cheated somehow. There’s no
way someone like you would have gotten such a high score.”

“By studying? And what do you mean, someone like me?” Ellana demands.

“You’re Dalish! Your people have completely rejected everything about the Chantry for hundreds of
years. And yet you make an A on a test that discusses the finer, more subtle points of the Chant of
Light? What kind of idiot do you take me for?”

Ellana can only stare at him. Fury churns in her gut, creeps up her neck and inflames her ears but it
has nowhere to go. If Roderick was some jackass classmate she could deck him, or scream at him, or
viciously break down for him all the ways he sucks.

But he’s not. He’s a tenured, well-respected professor. He has power and control over her grade and
subsequent GPA. He could even get her expelled.

“I let your first paper slide even though you clearly employed someone’s help in writing it, but I will
not accept cheating on my tests!”
“I wrote that paper myself,” Ellana cries. “I studied my ass off for your test. I researched. I prepared! Why is it so hard for you to believe I did it myself?”

“Don’t you lose your temper with me, girl, just because you got caught. You’re getting a zero and I’m reporting you to the Dean.”

Shaking, Ellana leaves before she does or says anything seriously stupid. And she makes a bee-line straight for Dorian’s office. It’s empty, he’s probably teaching one of his classes, so Ellana sits down on the floor beside his office and tries to regain some of her composure.

“Look at that, someone’s dropped another stray in front of my office,” says Dorian a while later. “I keep telling them to take you all to the shelter, but no one listens.”

Ellana leaps to her feet. “I need to talk to you.”

Dorian looks closely at her face and then quickly unlocks his door and ushers her inside.

“What happened? Did you punch someone again?”

“Can I get expelled for cheating?” she asks.

Just thinking about it again makes her stomach roil and she sinks into a chair. Oh gods, what would Fen’Harel think if she got kicked out for cheating? Would he make her repay all the money he’s spent?

“You could,” Dorian says slowly. “Why are you asking?”

“I got an A on my midterm and my professor thinks I cheated.”

She explains the situation that’s been brewing between her and Roderick all semester, including her grade and his comments about her first paper.

“What a racist shit!” Dorian exclaims. “It’s clear he doesn’t think a Dalish student could accomplish much. That’s why he doubts your abilities.”

“He’s going to get me expelled,” Ellana says, a lump forming in her throat.

“No, he’s not, he doesn’t have proof.” It’s almost reassuring how dismissive Dorian sounds at the idea. “You said he was going to the Dean? You should beat him to it.”

“You want me to go to the Dean? Is that even allowed?”

“Of course it’s allowed! The Dean of Humanities is Dr. Giselle. I’ll shoot her an email and get you an appointment.”

Dr. Giselle used to be a Revered Mother in the Chantry before quitting and pursuing her doctorate. That information alone is enough to intimidate the hell out of Ellana. She might be just as bad, if not worse than Dr. Roderick. Fear keeps Ellana hovering at the woman’s door, binder clutched in sweaty hands.

Not having met any actual Chantry mothers, Ellana expects some grizzled old hag, with pinched expressions and no tolerance for anything.

Instead Dr. Giselle stands tall and beautiful, with dark skin and a complexion that has barely aged
“Ms. Lavellan, do come in,” she says, swinging the door to her office wide open. Inside are shelves and shelves of books, dark red and gold curtains, and a huge mahogany desk.

Her accent is lightly Orlesian and soothes like a cup of hot tea and honey.

“Have a seat,” she says, and Ellana sinks into one of the cushioned chairs. Dr. Giselle sits at the other side of her desk and puts on a pair of small-framed reading glasses before studying her computer.

“The accusations stand as thus,” she begins. “That you had someone edit or rewrite your paper for you and that you cheated – somehow – on Dr. Roderick’s midterm test. Remind me, please, what class this is?”

Ellana swallows, her mouth dry. “Comparative Religions, Ma’am.”

Dr. Giselle purses her lips into a thin line. “I thought so. Forgive me for asking, but your tattoos. Are you Dalish?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You must have worked very hard to leave home and come to Skyhold. It’s impressive and commendable.”

Her words contain no trace of the scorn or thinly veiled suspicion of Dr. Roderick. Ellana bows her head.

“Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate that.”

“Do you have the copy of your paper that I asked you to bring?”

“Yes.” Ellana fishes it out of her binder and hands it to Giselle.

The woman takes a few moments to scan the first couple of pages while Ellana sits and watches, feeling more nervous than she ever has in her entire fucking life.

“Your thesis is fascinating and well researched,” she announces several agonizing moments later. “I admit, we don’t often get opportunities to hear the Dalish point of view of the Chantry. It’s also very well written for a freshman, though I don’t doubt that this is your own work. Even so, Skyhold offers several tutors for students to improve their writing, so it’s not out of line to have another read over and edit your work, so long as your ideas are your own. Yet you received a D. Did he explain why?”

“He said I didn’t cite enough sources,” Ellana explains. “But I was drawing on my personal experience with my religion and I didn’t know I needed to cite that.”

“Hmmm.” A note of disapproval colors her tone and Ellana hasn’t prayed to the Creators in a very long time, but she is doing it now. “Did he explain how he knew you cheated on your midterm?”

Ellana shakes her head. “No, Ma’am. He just said he knew I did somehow.”

“I see,” says Dr. Giselle tersely. “I think I know what happened here, Ms. Lavellan. I will confer with Dr. Roderick for his side of things, but I have reached my conclusion.”

The bottom of Ellana’s stomach drops out and her fear must show on her face because Dr. Giselle smiles at her.
“It’s clear that you’re a hard worker and you value your academics, on top of what was revealed to me in Dr. Pavus’s glowing recommendation of his experience with you as his student. I will deal with Dr. Roderick and he will trouble you no further with these kinds of accusations.”

“Thank you so much,” Ellana says, heaving an inward sigh of relief.

Dr. Giselle escorts her out with a smile and a warm pat on the back, keeping Ellana’s paper for her meeting with Roderick.

True to her word, Roderick backs off. Her midterm grade goes in as an A, and he drops the accusations of cheating as if they’d never happened. They come to an unspoken arrangement of mutually ignoring each other’s presence, which suits Ellana just fine.

Next semester, someone else is teaching Comparative Religions.

Chapter End Notes

Elu'melana: literally "winter secret" a word I pieced together from the amazing, wonderful Project Elvhen Lexicon by FenxShiral. Elu'melana is a modern Dalish holiday I made up centered around Dirthamen. During Elu'melana, the Dalish gather around a large bonfire and offer secrets to Dirthamen by writing them on slips of paper and feeding them into the fire.

I enjoyed writing about those freezing dorms as some sort of wish fulfillment. It's so so so hot here and HUMID. I am Josephine. I hate everything.

Thank you to everyone who has read, kudos, and commented on this fic! I will reply to all your comments in the next couple days or so. Reading them makes my day!

Sorry for the slow update! It took a while for me to send it to my beta reader. :)

Right before Spring Break, Dorian hauls her into his office.

“Biscuit?” he says, holding out a tin of chocolate chip cookies. They look suspiciously homemade. She didn’t peg Dorian as a baker.

“Am I in trouble?” she asks, throwing her memories of the past two weeks up for review. But ever since Dr. Giselle, her classes have gone smoothly, so that can’t be it.

“I admit I’m a little concerned about you,” he says. “About your major, more specifically.”

“... What about it?”

“The fact that you don’t have one. I understand completely how unfair it is to ask people barely out of childhood to decide on the rest of their life, but the fact of the matter is that if you don’t pick a formal major for next year you are going to fall behind. I don’t know how your scholarship works or how many semesters it lasts, but you can’t dither around in university forever trying to find yourself.”

Ellana feels like someone has kicked her in the gut. Abelas had gone over the terms and conditions with her, but that was almost a year ago and she can’t remember the specifics about her degree, just that she could get one. Even if Fen’Harel had offered indefinite college support, the thought of taking advantage of so much money makes her stomach clench. Dorian is right – she needs to get her degree and start becoming financially independent as soon as possible.

“Do you have anything in mind?” he asks, tone gentler than earlier.

“Um --“ She reaches around for something, anything, but her brain has stalled, like a toy with dead batteries. Cheeks burning, she lowers her head.

“I was afraid of that. Think it over during the break. Freshman don’t register for classes until the week before finals. I expect an answer by then. You could stay undecided for another year, but I won’t let you do that to yourself. You’re too bright with too much potential. You remind me of me.”
“There is no higher compliment,” she says with a bit of an eyeroll. “But . . . thanks for looking out for me.”

Dorian just waves his hand. “Have another biscuit and think nothing of it. Lots of students are where you’re at. Some of them change majors every semester. You could be a lot worse.”

It doesn’t feel that way, however. The shame sits heavy in her, haunting her over break. Josie jetsets for Antiva just two hours after her last class, but most of the student body stays behind. As Ellana quickly learns, Spring Break is really code for “hurry up and finish these six papers all due the week after break.” It’s essentially one long, continuous study session.

Except for people like Josephine, who completes all of her homework assignments ahead of time.

In between study dates with her friends on the quad and pool matches with Cassandra and Varric, Ellana spends the rest of her break holed up in the library with the course catalog.

The problem isn’t that none of the majors interest her.

It’s that almost all of them do.

She’s discovered a near voracious appetite for anything unknown to her, and right now the possibilities for herself feel limitless. To resign herself to just one aspect of something feels so restrictive. But Dorian is right. It would be wrong to take advantage of Fen’Harel’s kindness so she can play at the university for forever.

She makes a list of all the majors that give her the most interest

1. Ancient Elven Literature/Pre-Chantry literature  
2. History – Pre-Andraste and Post-Andraste  
3. Sociology  
4. Art History (Elvhen, Dwarven)  
5. Creative Writing and Publishing (Creators help her but she does enjoy Varric’s assignments)  
6. Archeology

The list goes on for half a page. She then cross researches each major with an annual salary and job prospects.

It does not look good. Ellana groans and lays her head on the desk, fighting the urge to cry. She did not move out of the Dales and secure some kind of miracle scholarship just so she could get a degree that kept her in just as much poverty as she lived in before university.

“What are you alright?”

A warm voice sounds in front of her. Ellana lifts her head up to see the librarian setting a cup of tea on the desk. Her white hair is pulled back away from her face, which is lightly lined and unbearably kind.

“You’re always in here, working hard,” the woman continues. “You’re too young to look so stressed.”

“I need to pick a major,” says Ellana, “but everything I’m interested in is not going to pay well or have any job openings when I graduate.”

The librarian cocks her head to the side. “What kind of things are you interested in?”
Ellana shows her the list. The librarian’s eyes scan the list quickly.

“‘You have a wide range of interests,’ the librarian says approvingly. ‘Perhaps things are not so dire. Most of these could be pursued as a hobby, which could then be financed by a degree with security even if it’s not in something you love.’

“That’s true,” says Ellana slowly. “That’s very helpful, thank you.”

She flips open the catalog again, scanning in the other sections.

“That’s my job,” says the librarian. “I will leave you to continue the search. My name is Wynne, if you have any more questions.”

Ellana thanks her again and starts circling potential majors.

“Good Maker, what are these?”

The moan coming out of Josephine’s mouth is borderline obscene as she finishes off the cookie in one bite.

Krem shrugs, and the faint blush on his cheeks doesn’t escape Ellana’s attention. “I don’t know, Coach made them.”

Ellana grins at him. “Your coach bakes you cookies for a study session? You might as well give up the jig and start calling him Dad.”

“Shut up, they’re leftover from my birthday.”

“He gave you birthday cookies?”

“I don’t know why you’re making this such a big deal. Your weird gay uncle buys you food all the time.”

“That’s not --!” Ellana stops and thinks. “No, that’s true. Dorian spoils me rotten.”

She snags one of the cookies and takes a bite. No wonder Josephine moaned in public – Coach Bull is a baking god. But they also taste familiar in a way she can’t place.

“Hey, can you ask your dad to make me some? My birthday’s coming up.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

A couple weeks later Ellana, Krem, and Cassandra browse through the used bookstore in town. Cassandra loudly proclaims that she is heading towards the religious section, but Ellana sees her duck into the romance aisle when she thinks no one is looking. Meanwhile, Krem is on a desperate search for the next book in his favorite fantasy series.

“You know we can just find it online and order it,” she tells him as he frantically scans the shelves.

“I stayed up till three in the morning last night reading the last one, and if I have to wait for five-day
shipping after that fucking cliffhanger, I will die.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “This is why you wait until the entire series is out before you start reading,” she mutters. “Come on, I think there was a display of them over there.”

Something familiar catches her eye as they pass the Technology aisle. As a reflex Ellana stops and turns her head to see Coach Bull and Dorian making out like teenagers by some coding manuals. She freezes so suddenly that Krem nearly runs into her. Too busy moaning against each other’s lips, neither Coach Bull nor Dorian notice Krem and Ellana staring open mouthed at them. Then Coach Bull’s hand wanders down from Dorian’s shoulder to his belt buckle and that’s when Krem hauls Ellana away by the back of her shirt into a corner two aisles over.

“Oh my God,” he hisses. “I’ve heard that it’s traumatic to walk in on your parents but I’ve never had to experience that for myself?”

“Are we going to be step cousins now?”

“How long do you think we should wait?” he asks. “We cannot let them see us.”

Ellana shrugs. “They’re just kissing, right? You don’t think they would try to . . . Not in public, right?”

Krem’s eyes get wide. “We need to grab Cass and get out of here.”

They run into Cass going the long way around to the Romance section. Judging from the bright red flush on her face and outrage in her eyes, they are too late to save her.

“Did you see—” she splutters before Krem shushes her.

“Let’s get out of here. We’ll come back tomorrow,” he says.

“I can’t unsee that,” Cass cries as they drag her out of the store. “This is a public bookstore, not some back alley behind a bar!”

She carries on about propriety and romance all the way back to campus while Krem secretly films her with his phone.

“This is going to make us famous on the internet,” he whispers to Ellana.

“If she doesn’t find out and kill us first.”

Krem ends up ordering the book online and shells out the exorbitant fee for one-day shipping.

“I don’t know if I can set foot in that store for a while,” Krem says. “We don’t know how often they bone in there, and I don’t want the flashbacks.”

“Understandable.”

It’s a warm, breezy day (finals only a month away), so Krem and Ellana are laying on her comforter in the quad, the leaves of a massive oak swaying above them. Krem has his beloved next volume and Ellana rereading her notes for Sten’s upcoming quiz.

“Kremsicle!”
The tell-tale shadow of Coach Bull appears, and Ellana shifts slightly to the left so he’s blocking out the glare on her notebook paper.

“There’s no practice tonight,” Coach Bull informs them.

Krem raises his eyebrow. “You know we’ve got a game next week.”

Coach Bull waves his hand. “It’s U of O. Everyone knows they’re a bunch of sissies. Something came up that I got to take care of.”

Ellana catches Krem’s eye and gives him the barest hint of a smirk.

“Alright, Coach. See you tomorrow, then.”

“And say hello to Dorian for me,” Ellana calls out as Coach Bull turns to leave.

“Will do.” He stops and looks over his shoulder. “I mean, if I see him around,” he adds with a forced casualness that does not fool her. “I’ve got some errands to run, I don’t expect to run into him.”

“I hear he likes to hang out in bookstores,” says Ellana, nonchalantly flipping through her notes. “If you’re looking for him.”

She looks up to his stone-faced expression and gives him a breezy smile.

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

From:e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Dear Fen’Harel,

So Coach Bull and Dorian are totally hooking up. Krem and I busted them making out at the Bookwyrm the other day, but there’s been other hints now that I know to look for them. Like the time Dorian wasn’t in his office during office hours and I found him walking out of the basement of the Student Union, where the gym is. He told me he went on a latte run, but the coffee shop’s on the second floor. Also the cookies he gave me one time tasted exactly like the cookies Coach Bull made for Krem.

I don’t know why they’re trying to keep it a secret. I mean, neither one of them really give two fucks about being professional, and if Dorian doesn’t ping someone’s gaydar within five minutes, then that person doesn’t have one. It’s also not like any of us wouldn’t be wildly happy for them.

Krem thinks Coach Bull has some secret arranged wife back in Seheron.

I just think they like the taboo vibe of pretending it’s a secret, arranging meetings like they’re undercover spies. Even though they’re not that good at it because Krem and I have busted them at least three times without their knowledge. Apparently they are hooking up around campus and downtown like it’s some kind of bingo card.

It’s made life for the Chargers a little more lucrative as they set up a betting pool with Varric on how long it will take for Dorian and Bull to be outed by a coworker, or where they’ll hook up next. So far Krem’s made about fifty bucks.

Don’t worry, I didn’t put in more than five sovereigns in the betting pool, but I couldn’t resist the one time, especially since I had insider information with Dorian.
Finals are coming up in a couple of weeks. I was going to ask if it was okay to fly me out to the Dales for the summer? If not, I can catch a ride or take the bus, but I would very much like to visit my clan. I haven’t seen anyone in three years.

Not that much will have changed since then.

Yours,

Ellana

She feels a little guilty asking for a plane ticket, even though he offered to pay for one over winter break. But browsing around for one in the library shocked her. Five hundred sovereigns for a one-way ticket? It’s even more of a bullshit scam than college textbooks! Even though Fen’Harel seems to be swimming in money, judging from the tuition bills he pays without a bat of an eyelash, it still feels wrong. A trip to the Dales has nothing to do with school or living expenses.

But at the same time, she can’t help but grasp at the first opportunity to go home in three years. Minimum wage jobs generally do not allow extended vacations even if she could afford the bus ticket down and didn’t mind bailing on Alistair for the rent.

The ticket Fen’Harel sends her is first class. Ellana calls Istie the second it appears in the mail.

“I sure hope you haven’t rented out my room,” she says in lieu of hello. “Because I’m coming home.”

“Oh, ghilan,” Istie gasps. “That’s wonderful news! I will have to kick Aenor out of your room, but he should be understanding of the circumstances.”

Ellana learned how to lie with a straight face from Istie, who could say the most outrageous comments with the most deadpan delivery and no one would challenge it because of her Keeper status. Even now Ellana isn’t sure if Istie actually let her room out to the clan’s resident moonshine maker, who sleeps in the forest next to his vats more than inside his own cabin.

“Make sure you air that room out a few days before I get there,” Ellana says, playing along to call her bluff.

“Oh, Aenor knows he isn’t allowed to stay in your room without regular baths. We have an agreement.”

Ellana almost asks if her maela is serious. Everyone knows Aenor’s “house” is a shack he built himself deep in the forest with no running water or electricity and that Istie has been trying to get him to upgrade it for years. It wouldn’t be a surprise if she just finally forced Aenor to move in with her under the guise of needing help with repairs. Istie takes her Keeper duties seriously, even if her position is mostly ceremonial now.

“Well, good for him. I bet he looks like a whole new elf. I fly in the twenty-fifth of Bloomingtide. I should get to Scottsdale airport by four fifteen and take the bus.”

“Nonsense. I will pick you up.”

Ellana’s eyebrows jump up. “It’s a three-hour drive. You think the truck will make it that far?”

“Falon and I do not appreciate your lack of faith. We will be there. You should go and study. I want
to see your report card when you get here, and it had better be immaculate.”

“Yes, Ma’am. You won’t be disappointed. And tell Dany and Mihris that I’ll see them soon and I
miss them.”

There’s a strange moment of silence on Istie’s end. Did Ellana cut out? Reception is terrible out in
the Dales.

“Of course I will. Nuvenan na amahn.”

Ellana smiles into the phone. “Soon I will be.”

When registration rolls around, Ellana signs up for Dorian’s first slot.

“Well, darling, what have you decided?” he asks, offering her an oatmeal cookie.

Judging from the way it melts in her mouth and the moan she has to hold back, it’s a Coach Bull
cookie. Dorian must be really good at sex if he keeps getting these.

“No,” he interrupts. “Let me guess . . . history of some sort. Art History? You keep going back to
Dr. Sten even though you’ve completed your fine art requirement.”

“I keep going back to Sten because he expects me to and I want to keep all my limbs,” Ellana says.
“Actually, I’m going to major in Computer Science.”

Dorian stares at her for a moment before bursting out into laughter. “That was good. You actually
had me there for a moment. Your poker face is flawless.”

“I’m serious. I want to go into Computer Science.”

His perfect eyebrows jump. “What on earth possessed you to pick that?”

“It’s one of the fastest job markets in Thedas,” she points out.

“Forgive me, but I had you pegged as a Humanities girl,” he says, frowning. “Are you sure this is
what you want?”

“Yes.”

Not in the slightest, actually, which Dorian’s keen eyes pick up on. He leans forward in his chair, his
gaze deeply serious.

“Ellana, we both know you have no interest in coding. It’s difficult and rigorous, and I think you
would be better off picking something you actually like.”

“Are you saying I can’t handle it?”

“I’m saying you’re going to be miserable!” Dorian leans back into his chair, fingers picking at the tip
of his mustache. “University is hard, Skyhold especially so. If you’re not pursuing something you
love, you’re not going to make it. I’ve seen it happen many times before, and I don’t want to watch
you burn out because you’ve invested all your energy into something that makes you unhappy. You
have too much potential for that.”

Ellana bites at her lip, equally frustrated. Dorian is totally right and she can’t even deny it. “It’s true,
I’m not in love with computer science. I’ve never even considered it before. But there aren’t any jobs in the humanities – I looked. And I didn’t take the opportunity to come here just so I could go right back to being a starving history nerd once I leave. I had enough of that in Orlais."

“A degree from Skyhold will open many doors for you,” Dorian says, his voice softer than before. “Even in Humanities. You don’t have to give up.”

“I’m not giving up. All the subjects I love are things I can easily pursue in my free time if I have a high-paying, secure job. I’m done being poor,” she adds, a little more fiercely than she intended.

Dorian looks at her for a long moment and then sighs and turns back to his computer.

“Well, buckle up, darling, because I’m placing you in my Calculus class. You’ve got some math to catch up on.”

He also says nothing when she adds Modern Fereldan Lit and Intro to Demography to her course-load because Dorian is wonderful like that.

“So, I have proposition for you,” Josephine says one evening on the way back from the cafeteria.

The sun still clings to the horizon, even though it’s after eight in the evening. Finals are two weeks away.

“Josie!” says Ellana in a scandalized tone. “I’m flattered, but we’re roommates. It might get complicated.”

“You’re ridiculous.” A faint blush blooms on her cheeks. “That’s not what I meant. My Sociology professor just assigned us our final project. She wants us to research or interview someone from a commonly misunderstood culture. I thought, if you were comfortable, you could share your experiences about being Dalish.”

“Fen’Harel only knows what kind of horrifying misinformation would be found there. “I don’t mind. But I’m just warning you, Dalish culture isn’t particularly kind to humans.”

“I’m not going to be offended by the truth of someone’s experiences.”

Well. Ellana should have expected no less.

“I’m guessing, since it was just assigned and not due for several weeks, that you would want to start tonight?”

Josie beams. “Tonight is perfect.”

They settle on Josie’s bed, her tablet balanced on a pillow in her lap, stylus held like a fountain pen as she stares expectantly at Ellana, who sits with her back braced against the wall.

“I’m assuming you have questions for me,” Ellana says.
“I do, but I don’t have to stick to them, if you want to talk about something else.”

“I don’t care. Hit me with one.”

“Alright.” Josie hums as she skims a sheet of paper from her Sociology binder. “You said you lived with your Keeper after your parents died. What exactly is a Keeper? What role do they play?”

Ellana thinks for a moment. “A Keeper is sort of like an unofficial mayor. They’re the head of the clan. It’s the Keeper’s job to know and understand all our history and traditions and keep them alive within the clan. Now they’re just kind of a Master of Ceremonies for all our holidays and they give out advice and deal with inter-clan conflicts.

“Back when the Dalish were still nomadic, the Keeper decided when and where we moved, who we traded with outside the clan, and settled all disputes within the clan. Back in the old, old days, the Keeper was supposed to protect the clan from Fen’Harel.”

Josephine raises an eyebrow. “Oh? Who is Fen’Harel?”

“He’s the Dalish boogey man, essentially. According to the old Dalish faith, Fen’Harel was a trickster god that locked our Creators away so they could no longer care for the elves. He represents rebellion and betrayal, and is generally the scapegoat for anything bad that happens ever. No one really believes in him anymore, and historical research hints that he might have actually been an ancient king that tried to ban worship of the Creators for some reason. But so much of our history has been wiped out that it’s hard to know anything for certain. That’s why we have so many myths.”

With Josephine’s guidance and curiosity, Ellana patches together the details of her culture and history. She explains how the Dalish have gone from nomadic tribes of families to sedentary farming villages. Even though each village still calls itself a clan, not everyone is related. (Though the smaller the village, the more often that occurs.)

“The Dalish have a reputation for isolation that comes across, for humans, as arrogance. What is your perspective on it?”

“Honestly, we just want to be left the hell alone.” By now they’ve broken out the snacks and Ellana grabs a handful of cheese popcorn and continues. “The Dalish have been so fucked over by the Chantry for so long that when we had the chance to be in our own little section where there weren’t any humans, we jumped on it.”

“You’re talking about the Treaty of Halamshiral? Where the Dalish were gifted with the Dales on the condition that they disbanded the Emerald Knights, ceased all military actions, and allowed themselves to be ruled under Orlesian jurisdiction?”

“Um, yeah.”

Of course Josephine knows about the Treaty of Halamshiral. That shouldn’t surprise Ellana, but it does. So far in her experience, nobody really knows or cares about the treaty. Actually, nobody really knows or cares about Dalish history or culture. Ellana’s just part of those wild elven hillbillies in the south who will shoot you if you put so much as a toenail on their property.

“Are any Dalish upset over the Treaty? I know it came at a great loss of life.”

Ellana thinks back to some of the older elves, and the drunken human trash talk that inevitably crops up during bonfire parties. “Some elves can get bitter about it. They think the Emerald Knights could have won back more territory or taken down Orlais if we had just continued. But most of us are happy. We got lucky, because the Dales are good, fertile land and it apparently looks closer to
Arlanthan’s wilderness than Ferelden or the Marches. It provides us everything we need, and self-
reliance is one of the most highly valued traits in our culture.”

Josephine takes a long moment to scribble out more notes before looking up again.

“So, the Dalish seek isolation for peace and the pride of living off the land?”

“Essentially. We want to depend on humans as little as possible, so we provide everything ourselves, 
even our own electricity. Part of it is a point of pride. Another part is that we just don’t trust the 
Treaty to last. Looking back on our history, it’s only a matter of time before the humans find another 
excuse to start a war, and this time we don’t have an official military.”

Josephine looks concerned. “You really think the relations are that bad between the two?”

Ellana shakes her head. “I haven’t experienced anything violent or horrifying. But that doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen. It’s hard for Dalish to give humans the benefit of the doubt after everything that’s happened.”

Her friend goes quiet for a moment, processing. She types something out, biting her lip, before continuing.

“What did you do for fun?” Josephine asks, the subject changing swiftly to something innocent. “It doesn’t sound as though there was much . . . city entertainment,” she finishes delicately.

“Oh no. I didn’t see a movie in a theater until my last year of high school, and even then, Dany, 
Mihris, and I had to take a two hour road trip outside of the Dales in order to find one.”

Josephine looks horrified, and Ellana grins. “There’s all kinds of stuff to do in the woods. Hide and seek in the dark, scavenger hunts, exploring caves, finding the perfect place for a secret hideout. For a whole month I pretended to be a spy and I recorded all the activity I observed in the woods, including the secret place where they made moonshine.” She chuckles fondly. “I got in a lot of trouble for that.”

“Besides,” she continues, “my people will use any excuse to throw a party. We have a holiday for all nine Creators, plus a New Year’s holiday, a holiday for the Emerald Knights, and a holiday celebrating all the gods at once just as a general fuck you to the Chantry. Not to mention that anyone’s birthday is an excuse to throw a bonfire and drink moonshine and roast just about anything we can get our hands on.”

“That sounds like Antivan family reunions,” says Josephine, smiling. “Though we drink homemade wine.”

When Josephine runs out of questions, it’s nearly one in the morning. Ellana feels disappointed; she could easily go on all night. It’s refreshing to explain her culture to a curious and sensitive audience. No one has ever asked her about her culture. They might be too afraid of saying something insensitive or perhaps they just don’t care.

Ellana gets that vibe from her friends; it’s not that they don’t like her culture, it’s that they don’t notice it or think about it. And why would they? The only thing that sets Ellana apart from them are her tattoos. It’s not like they’ve ever seen her dance to ward off Fen’Harel at New Year’s or hand-carve a bow or decorate a Halla’s horns. And they never will, because Ellana has become her Keeper’s worst nightmare and assimilated almost completely into human culture.

Not that she had much choice; she needed to blend in, especially in her first few months with no friends and no one she could trust. Though now she does feel safe enough to practice her traditions,
Ellana still doesn’t bother. It’s hard to keep up Dalish traditions when you’re the only Dalish around. Hard and lonely and it’s not worth the homesickness that accompanies it.

There’s a knock on the door as Ellana packs her suitcase. Josephine was going to show her how to roll her shirts so they don’t wrinkle, but she stepped out and hasn’t returned for the last hour or so.

“Come in,” she says, back turned to the door. “I’m just finishing up.”

Heavy footsteps creep up behind her and then Ellana finds herself hoisted up and slung over a broad shoulder. She hollers and slams her foot into the solid mass that has scooped her up.

Coach Bull grunts, nearly dropping her. “Chill out, Ellana. It’s just me.”

“Coach? What the hell are you doing?”

She should have recognized the smell of his fancy Qunari cologne, which he practically bathes in since he started . . . whatever the fuck he has with Dorian.

“It’s just a friendly kidnapping. Hang on for the ride. I promise you won’t regret it.”

He walks out of the dorm with her slung over him like a sack of footballs and out to his motorcycle.

“Hold on tight,” he says, handing her a helmet. It’s smaller than his, without holes for horns, and smells of Dorian’s pomade.

Gods, they really are the worst kept secret in Skyhold.

She can’t reach around his middle to hold on, so she grips her fingers around his belt and prepares to hold on for dear life. It’s not unlike riding a Northern Hart at breakneck speed, though Coach Bull follows all the traffic laws and doesn’t try to do a wheelie.

He finally skids to a stop in front of the college bar downtown where Ellana got shit-faced after first semester finals and drunk-emailed Fen’Harel. Ellana takes off the helmet and runs her fingers through the ratty, windswept mess of her hair.

“Coach, I’m flattered you want to go out with me, but I don’t think Dorian shares.”

Coach Bull laughs. “You have no idea what kind of things Dorian is into.”

“And it’s going to stay that way.” Ellana fights off a shudder at the memory of the bookstore incident.

“Relax. We just wanted to catch you before you left.”

“We?”

He leads her into the bar and through to the backroom where the pool tables are kept. Party streamers hang from the rafters, along with balloons and a “Happy Birthday” banner. Several plates of wings and pitchers of beer rest on a table littered with glitter confetti and wrapped gifts.

Ellana’s mouth falls open.

“Surprise!” Josephine cries, leaping up from behind the pool table. A few seconds later, everyone else pops up.
“I told you on the count of three!” Varric says to Josephine.

“Sorry! I just got too excited.”

“Happy Birthday, darling,” Dorian says, coming around the table to hug her. “I hope Bull didn’t rough you up too badly.”

“I think he saves that for you,” she whispers in his ear and he pinches her arm before letting her go.

“I know your birthday is in the summer, so we decided to celebrate before you left.”

“And how did you know that, exactly?” she asks.

Dorian smirks at her. “Your files, of course.”

She looks at all the decorations and the small cake hiding behind the wings and the presents and almost tears up. Thank the gods, Varric approaches her with a glass of beer before she can embarrass herself.

“Dorian and I challenge you to a rematch at pool. And this time, Cassie isn’t going to take the first shot,” he adds, glaring at her over his shoulder.

Cassandra shrugs, looking downright dangerous in fingerless leather gloves. “If you feel you need the handicap of the first shot, I have no issues letting you take it.”

“Oh-ho! We’ll see who needs a handicap after this match,” Varric cries, eyes twinkling.

Ellana downs half the glass. “Krem, hold my beer! Let’s do this.”

They stay at the bar until nearly two in the morning. Ellana’s head spins from the mixture of too much beer and too many wings and too much sugar from the chocolate-mocha cake. They all take the tram back up the mountain, even Varric. (Though Dorian rides off with Iron Bull on the motorcycle to gods only know where.) Josephine has been reduced to a giggly mess that Krem carries like a bride from the tram station to their dorm and deposits in her bed.

He gives her a tight hug. “Happy early Birthday, Ellana.”

“Thanks,” she says, squeezing him back. “And thank you for the pens. Those will probably last me until graduation.”

Krem had gifted her a pack of twenty pens from her favorite brand, in all shades of the rainbow, perfect for color-coding her notes.

“I hope you have a good time back home,” he says, smiling. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

He leaves with a wave and Ellana watches him down the hallway before she shuts the door. Josephine sighs happily, staring up at the ceiling, her eyeliner smudged under her eyes.

“I love birthdays,” she says. “You know, you never—” she hiccups, “—you never said how old you were.”

“I’m twenty-one,” Ellana says, picking up the shirt she dropped when Iron Bull had grabbed her.

Josephine gasps. “You’re so old! I’m only nineteen!”
“It’s not that big of a difference.”

“You’re a grandmother!” Josephine shouts before dissolving into another fit of giggles.

Ellana rolls her eyes and smiles, finishing what little is left of her packing. Josephine’s laughter slowly fades into delicate snores.

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Yay it’s another drunk email

Attached is a picture of me and all my awesome presents. Tonight Coach Bull kidnapped me (literally, I was slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes) and took me to a bar for a surprise birthday party. And since my birthday isn’t for another two months (the 15th of Solace) I was definitely surprised.

I drank beer, ate wings, kicked ass at pool (I’ve been practicing with Cassandra) and listened to Krem regale, once again, the Chargers’ latest victory.

I mean, it’s not bonfire with Dalish sweetbread and moonshine, but it was still a damn good party. But don’t worry, I’m sober enough to keep my sanity while I’m writing to you.

I don’t know what the internet situation is going to be like in the Dales, so this might be the last time you hear from me in a while. Thanks again for the tickets. It’s such a relief to finally go home.

Yours,

Ellana

Chapter End Notes

maela -- grandmother

Nuvenan na amahn -- I miss you. Literally: I wish you were here

ghilan -- little monster

All Elvhen words come from the fantastic Fenxshiral’s Elvhen dictionary.
Guys, I had no idea this chapter would take this long. I had to scrap the whole thing and re-write it and the past month has been so crazy, I've had maybe an hour to write each week. But it's finally done! The next update should not take near as long. Thanks to everyone who's stuck with this so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: No Subject

Look, I know this is last minute and it will probably cost a lot of money and I am really really sorry, but you have got to get me out of here. Like, as soon as possible. Please. You can dock the money from my stipend if you want, I don't care. I have to leave.

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@mail.com

Re: No Subject

Attached are your confirmation numbers for your tickets. All you need to do is show them to the ticket agent with your identification and they will print them off to you. You leave tomorrow morning.

Please let me know if I can do anything else for you. It is no trouble.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

To her shock, Abelas waits for her at the luggage carousel in Val Royeaux International, tapping at his phone and dressed in another immaculate suit. Her suitcase already rests by his feet, looking shabby as hell next to his perfectly shined loafers.

“Ah, Serah Lavellan,” he says when she approaches, glancing up from his phone. “I trust your flight went well.”

Ellana stares at him. “Yes,” she says slowly. “What are you doing here?”

Abelas finishes typing on his phone and slips it into his pocket in one smooth motion. “I am here to escort you to L'Hôtel de Mavise. Your benefactor has a room reserved for you until you receive your
new room assignment in August.”

“But, that’s, like, two months from now.”

Abelas blinks at her. “Yes. Is that a problem?”

“I can’t stay in one of the most expensive hotels in Val Royeaux for two months.”

“Why not? You’re not paying for it.”

“That’s exactly why not.”

“You have no other living arrangements, so you will have to make your peace with your discomfort,” Abelas says rather shortly, and Ellana kind of wants to punch him.

Instead, she leans down and grabs her suitcase by the handle. “Actually, I’m going to be staying with a friend of mine. He has an apartment on campus.”

She savors that split second of uncertainty and irritation that flashes across Abelas’s face. He recovers quickly, though.

“Then I will escort you back to Skyhold. Do you have any other business to attend to here or shall we go?”

For a brief moment she debates on making another run to the bathroom or maybe grabbing a coffee, just to irritate him. But right now, all Ellana wants is a warm bath and a nap, both of which await her at Varric’s place.

“No, we can go.”

A limousine waits for them outside. The driver – an elf – takes her luggage with a pasted-on smile and a lingering gaze at her forehead and deposits it into the trunk. Abelas opens the door for her and allows her to slide in first before climbing in after her and settling on the seat closest to the partition.

The two-hour drive back to Skyhold is long and quiet. Ellana does not have the energy to navigate the minefield of small talk with Abelas, who seems content to work on his laptop and ignore her presence entirely. The luxury of the limousine does not seem to faze him, but Ellana feels immediately uncomfortable. The black leather of the seats stretches taut enough not to leave any wrinkles, even when she sits, and the cushions are stiff and unforgiving. The windows are tinted heavily enough to make the early afternoon look like late evening and the air conditioning blasts her from all angles.

She misses the cracked, faded seats and rumbling engine and rolled down windows of Falon, Istie’s beat-up farm truck.

Ellana rolls one window down for a brief moment, intent on getting some fresh air, before Abelas rolls it back up and locks it without even sparing her a glance from his laptop. Swallowing her irritation, she leans her head against the glass and stares as the city slowly melts away into small rural towns, dotted with pine trees and scrubby grass.

When Ellana catches sight of Istie and her beat-up, bottle-green truck in the airport parking lot,
something in her heart clicks into place, a missing piece found. She grips the handle of her suitcase
tight and struggles not to run like a child as she approaches the truck. It’s hard to keep composure in
the face of the uncharacteristic grin on Istie’s usually reserved features.

“Oh, Ellana!” Istie opens her arms wide and hugs her. “Look at you!”

She pulls back and studies Ellana for a long moment, as if categorizing all the ways Ellana differs
from her memory.

“You cut your hair,” she says, fingering the ends that brush just under Ellana’s collarbone. “And
you’ve gotten so pale!”

“You stopped dying yours,” Ellana counters. “And Skyhold refuses to hold classes outside.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. You’ll have to regain your glow while you’re here. Also, I don’t dye my
hair, Ellana. We both know this.”

Ellana snorts, remembering very clearly the bottles of herbal dye Istie hides under the sink. Keeping
her hair dark was the one vanity Istie allowed herself, but now it’s streaked thickly with white. Still, it
only adds more dignity to Istie’s austere beauty, and it’s the only difference Ellana can see. Istie still
dresses in worn jeans and flowy, long sleeved tops, and she still wears her husband’s wedding ring
on the chain around her neck.

And she still drives the most worn-out, pathetically beat-up truck in all the Dales. Ellana tosses her
suitcase in the back and climbs in the passenger side. She looks at the cracked leather dashboard
and pats it affectionately.

“How did he do?” she asks as Istie starts him up.

The sound of the old motor clunking to life alone ignites a hundred memories.

“Falon did wonderfully. As always.” Istie kisses her fingertips and presses them against the
dashboard before backing out of the parking lot. “So, tell me more about your first year and these
friends you’ve made.”

Ellana rolls her window down, since Falon was built in the days when air conditioning was
considered a ludicrous luxury. The first hit of green summer air hits her like a drug. She sticks her
head out of the window like a dog and breathes in so deep that she sneezes and Istie laughs.

"It doesn’t smell like this in the city, does it," she says.

Ellana shakes her head and takes in another deep breath, tasting the clover and honeysuckle and the
tang of the coming rain. Even though Skyhold has a beautiful campus, full of gardens and grass and
tall trees, the mountain air smells different. Sharper and cleaner. There are no rotting logs or
cicadas. No plant out of place.

The Dales have a wild smell no place on Thedas can replicate.

Stories about college life last the entire three-hour journey home. Ellana spares no details, not even
about Coach Bull and Dorian’s bookstore tryst, which makes Istie laugh again.

“It sounds like you have fun,” her Keeper acknowledges, and if she feels sad or jealous about that, it
does not show on her beloved, wrinkled face.

“It is fun,” Ellana says but adds nothing more, not wanting to sound ungrateful for home.
A thousand memories rush in with the wind, feelings Ellana had buried to keep the homesickness at bay. Now she revels in them, and the feeling of finally being home, of being in a place where she isn’t weird or abnormal or exotic  --

“You were only in the Dales for two weeks.”

Ellana jerks out of her thoughts, looking up to find herself under the full force of Abelas’s gaze.

“Um . . . yes?”

Is he asking her a question? The flat tone of his voice makes it impossible to tell for herself.

“You had intended on staying the entire summer. What changed?”

Ellana just stares at him. As if she would confide anything to a sad corporate lawyer robot with no soul.

“What changed for you?” she asks instead. “What made you leave the Dales?”

“. . . that is personal,” he says stiffly.

“Exactly.”

A silence follows, and Ellana turns her attention back out the window.

“I apologize. I overstepped,” comes his quiet reply some moments later. “My client is concerned about the circumstances behind your sudden departure. He – and I – suspect abuse.”

Ellana takes a deep, calming breath and stills her fingers as they instinctively curl into fists.

“It wasn’t abuse.” It’s an effort to keep her tone even. “They just . . . made it clear I should leave.”

“. . . I understand.”

A hint of emotion colors his usual wooden tone, something scarily close to empathy. Ellana glances over at him in surprise, but he has returned his gaze to the laptop, his features as emotive as stone. She probably imagined it.

Though when the limousine pulls up to the parking lot by the main office, an hour later, Abelas shakes her hand.

“I bid you good luck for the new school year, Serah Lavellan,” he says, with a bow to his head. “Dar’eth shiral.”

“I – thanks,” Ellana says, taken aback at his elvhen, the formality of which is usually reserved for those in a much higher station than a broke college student. “Tas Dar’eth.”

With another small bow, Abelas climbs back into the limo.

Varric waits for her in the coffeeshop by the Student Union.

“Well well, look what the cat dragged in,” he says, handing over an iced caramel latte.

Ellana takes it with a grateful smile and chugs it.
“Whoah, easy there, Inquisitor. That’s not fine whiskey. You’re gonna get a headache. You want real whiskey, we’ll go to the Hanged Man.”

“It’s, like, one in the afternoon.”

Varric shrugs. “Hey, when you need a stiff drink, you need a stiff drink.”

“I need a nap.”

“I can deliver that. Come, my place isn’t that far from here.”

Varric lives in the top floor of the nicer apartments scattered across campus, a full two floors to himself. Though usually reserved for students, especially the wealthy, senior/junior variety, Varric fits right in, walking past a majestic statue of Skyhold’s mascot made entirely out of beer cans without batting an eyelash. Ellana has to admire how the artist managed to get the wolf’s head up and howling with what looks like paperclips and prayers.

Inside the place is relatively clean, though books are stacked haphazardly on every surface, the couch is worn to optimal squishiness, and pictures of various people hang everywhere. Ellana parks her suitcase by it and sits down. Varric grabs some sheets from a small closet in the hallway by the stairs.

“Come on, spare bedroom is this way,” he says, jerking his head towards the stairs.

The spare bedroom sits right across the hallway from Varric’s room, furnished with a small double bed, a night stand, and five bookcases crammed along every other spare inch of the wall.

Ellana parks her suitcase by the end of the bed. “So is this a library with a bed in it, or a bedroom with a library in it?”

“Why can’t it be both?” Varric says. “Bathroom is across the hall. Spare towels and washcloths are kept under the sink and you can use my fancy shampoo, but be aware that I use the conditioner for my chest hair.”

“You condition your chest hair?”

“Of course. Why do you think it’s so touchably soft?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m not really a chest hair kind of girl.”

“Don’t worry. By the end of the month you will be.” Varric tosses her a wink and turns to go.

“Varric!” Ellana calls before he can leave. He waits patiently in the doorway. “. . . Thanks for letting me stay here, especially so last minute.”

He waves her off. “Don’t think anything of it, Ellana. I’m always here for my friends.”

With that, he leaves Ellana to her thoughts and the lump that forms unexpectedly in her throat. She lays down over the covers, taking deep breaths, and tries to go to sleep.

The unofficial border between the Dalish lands and the rest of Orlais is stark. The roads turn to gravel, the houses small and coarse, the yards overgrown, the trees thick and tall. The Dalish prefer to live with nature, not try to conquer it. Rarely are yards mowed down, much less as obsessively as
Ellana had worried, irrationally, that she wouldn't recognize her own home when she returned. A stupid thought because the only things that change in Wycombe are trees that fall in the summer storms.

Istie's house sits nestled between massive twin oaks, her rose garden an explosion of color off to the right, spilling around the back of the house. It looks like something from a storybook, even with the peeling, chipped paint and sagging porch, which still hasn’t been mended in the last three years.

Best of all, it looks exactly the way she remembers. Perhaps the rose garden has grown. She can’t help but to run her fingers over the worn kitchen table where she and Istie shared morning cups of rose hip tea and simple dinners, where she poured over homework or scribbled pictures.

A couple of her school pictures still hang on the wall, along with sketch portraits of Istie’s parents and sister and the daughter she lost before Ellana was born. Wildflowers from her parents’ funeral bouquet are still pressed and preserved in a frame in the living room. The stairwell still creaks when she goes upstairs to put away her suitcase.

She prepares herself for a stark room, her decorations packed away, and perhaps the smell of dirt and moonshine (she still can’t tell if Istie was joking about Aenor).

Instead, Ellana's room looks as though she had just stepped out the door, save for the picture of her, Dany, and Mihris the day they started high school that she took when she moved. The only picture of her parents has been moved from the bottom of her dresser drawer to the nightstand, but that's the only change she can discern.

Ellana hauls her suitcase on top of her bed with a thunk, but no dust blooms in the air. Istie has cleaned and laundered everything, and recently, too. Slowly, she runs her hand over the threads of her quilt, the patches made from old shirts from the clan, including her parents’.

When she comes back downstairs Istie has two steaming cups of rose hip tea sitting on the table. Suddenly, Ellana has to blink tears from her eyes, but nothing escapes Istie’s notice. She brings Ellana into a hug, the faint smell of roses and clover that always clings to her clothes filling her nose. Ellana buries her face into Istie’s shoulder.

“Oh, Ellana,” the older woman whispers, stroking Ellana’s hair. “Oh, Da’ghilan. I have missed you so. It's good to have you home.”

Not trusting herself to speak, Ellana can only nod.

Once settled in, Ellana changes into her beat up hiking boots she left in the closet and stops in the kitchen, where Istie slices potatoes and carrots.

“I’m going to see Dany and Mihris,” she says. “I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“They are not here.”

Ellana stops, her hand on the door knob. “What do you mean they’re not here?”

“They drove up to Boranehnh for the weekend. They should be back in time for Era'varlise.”
“Did they not know I was coming?”

Istie chuckles, though something about it sounds strained. “As if I could keep such a secret from the rest of the clan. Perhaps it slipped their minds.”

Ellana leans against the doorway, swallowing thickly against her disappointment. In Orlais, she couldn’t spare much thought for her two best friends, simply because the ache of missing them got too much to handle. Those first few months just the sight of a pair of friends in the mall or at a coffee shop would nearly send her to tears. But as her departure date crept closer and closer, she thought of them more and more. By the time she landed, she was wild with impatience to see them.

Now all her anticipation disappears her in a sudden rush, leaving her feeling rather empty.

“Can you water my roses, da’len, while I finish up dinner?”

“Sure,” Ellana says, grateful for a task to keep her busy.

Outside the sun sets low in the valley, thick and gold like butter. Long shadows stretch from the trees, and Ellana breathes in deeply the rose-tinted air before fetching the hand-beaten water pail from the shed out back. Scratched and scuffed, the flowers her younger self painted years ago still cling to the aluminum. She takes a moment to trace over them with her finger. Then she fills it up from the rusty spigot and gets to work.

It comes back like muscle memory, the journey from the spigot to the garden, how much water to pour, what the evening sunlight feels on the back of her neck, the slosh of the water as she walks back and forth.

A task and an evening that has not changed in three years, and Ellana didn’t know how much she needed the familiarity.

Once she’s done, Ellana restores the pail to its rightful place in the shed and joins Istie for dinner.

The roasted beef and potatoes make Ellana’s mouth water almost the second Istie withdraws them from the oven. Oh Creators, she hasn’t had a Dalish cooked meal in so long. (The meager recipes she and Alistair lived off of do not count.) Istie winks at her as she fans the steam from the dish.

“Eat as much as you like,” she says. “It’s just the two of us.”

“Really?” Ellana asks, surprised.

Unexpected guests drop by Istie’s house all the time, asking for advice or passing on gossip or borrowing from her extensive herb garden in the back yard, especially during dinner because they know Istie will feed them. So Ellana doesn’t really believe her when Istie promises a quiet night with no one else to steal any potential leftovers.

And yet dinner is quiet all the same. The phone doesn’t ring. No one knocks on the door. The only sounds come from the crickets chirping loudly outside, the clicks of spoons on the plates, and Istie’s gentle, probing questions.

“Have you decided on a major yet?”

Her question startles Ellana, who is straining to hear what she thinks might the sound of a truck door shutting. But no crunching footsteps follow, or knock on the door.

“Yeah, Dorian finally pushed me into deciding. He said it wasn’t wise to waste any more time on
classes if they weren’t going towards a degree.”

“And?”

“Computer science.” She tries to sound confident but it almost comes out a question.

Istie’s delicate white eyebrows climb up her forehead. “That is . . . unexpected. How did you come to such a decision?”

“It’s the fastest growing job market, it’s a skillset that people will always need, and it pays well,” Ellana rattles off, almost like a script. “It’s the kind of career I can have while pursuing my other interests in my free time.”

“Well, that sounds very practical.” Istie sounds proud and Ellana relaxes. “Though I must admit that it surprises me. I thought you would get a history degree.”

“There’re no jobs for a history degree. I don’t see a point in a college degree if it just puts me back into working three jobs for a closet-sized apartment.”

“So, you’re planning on staying out of the Dales after you graduate, then?” Istie keeps her voice carefully neutral.

“I . . . I’m still not sure.”

It’s not a decision she wants to agonize over until at least her senior year.

“That is still far in the future. I would focus my attention on classes for now.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

They eat in companionable silence for a few moments before Istie asks another question.

“How does your benefactor feel about your major?”

Ellana freezes, fork close to her mouth. Typical fucking Istie, waiting until Ellana thinks the conversation is safe again before dropping that bombshell. “I haven’t told him yet,” she says as nonchalantly as possible.

“Why not? Doesn’t he request that kind of information?”

“I just forgot. It was kind of last minute and then I had the trip here to pack for and moving out of the dorm and stuff. I’ll tell him.”

Istie levels her with the flat gaze of disbelief, and Ellana feels an interrogation coming on.

“You think he will disapprove.”

It’s not a question, but a statement of fact and Ellana definitely did not miss Istie’s mind reading fuckery that never allows Ellana privacy for her mistakes.

“I don’t know,” she finally admits. “He told me I could get any degree I wanted, but I think he was expecting something else and I just don’t want to hear anyone try to talk me out of it, much less the person who has total control over my education. So, I haven’t told him yet.”

“But you will?”
Ellana sighs. “Yes. I will. Eventually.”

“Alright,” Istie says, then returns to her plate.

Ellana waits for the inevitable disapproval, but Istie remains content to drop the conversation.

“That’s it? Just alright?”

“You’re an adult now. I trust you to do what’s right,” Istie says, simply, and Ellana sits, stunned for a moment.

After dinner Ellana shoos Istie from the kitchen and cleans up, falling back into the old routine effortlessly. While her hands stay busy, her mind wanders, confused and disappointed.

It’s not like she expected to be greeted by a parade and a giant banner reading ‘Welcome Home Ellana’. She knows a lot of the clan did not agree with her decision to leave, scared that the rest of the world would pounce on her the second she left the border.

But she expected something. The way this town practically considers gossip its own food group, you would think all kinds of her clanmates would be stopping by just to get a look at her. It’s so rare for anyone to leave the Dales that it’s weird for her arrival to be met with . . . crickets.

Varric’s idea of cooking revolves entirely around ordering pizza online and takeout on his phone. Though he expects nothing of her in terms of money or chores (he hires a maid twice a month to deep clean the place), Ellana feels she should at least feed herself, so she asks to make use of Varric’s small, lightly stocked kitchen.

“Knock yourself out,” Varric says. “But beware, most of the cookware is just for show. I don’t know how to use any of that shit. Just tell me if I need to get something.”

“I once cooked a frozen pizza one slice at a time in a toaster,” Ellana says. “Your kitchen is fine.”

Of course, Varric becomes increasingly curious about Ellana’s simple, patched-together fusion of Dalish and Orlesian dishes until Ellana starts making dinner for two in the evenings. Rather than sprawling out on the couch with various takeout containers, Ellana makes them eat at the kitchen island like civilized people.

“I didn’t peg you for the domestic type,” Varric teases.

“It’s how I grew up,” says Ellana shrugging. “And when I lived in Orlais, we didn’t have a table. Alistair and I ate in the living room on the coffee table made of wooden crates. That got old really fast.”

“You know, the more I hear about your years in Orlais, the more it sounds like something out of a novel, one of those old so-called classics about the veracity of the impoverished.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “There’s nothing romantic about being poor. I don’t know why people keep writing about it. It just sucks.”

“The same reason why people write novels about serial killers. It’s morbid fascination. Besides, it makes rich people feel less bad about being rich if they can read about how poverty has its own happiness.”
“You know a lot of rich people to come to that conclusion?”

Varric grimaces. “Not by choice. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, I’ll be the first to admit it. Growing up I was surrounded by jackasses so obsessed with their own wealth they were practically a caricature. It’s a shitty childhood, but it makes for good writing.”

Even after three years, Ellana hates grocery stores. They’re always cold and the harsh fluorescent lights make the produce look sick. Plus, the pre-packaged food is packed with shit that Ellana can’t even pronounce. She might have gotten used to the chemical taste in the food here in all those years eating ramen and apples with Alistair, but once she started eating Istie’s cooking again, Ellana does not look forward to cafeteria food again.

Krem accompanies her this time, dutifully pushing the cart and fetching items from the other side of the store, while Ellana picks through produce that either won’t be ripe for another week or will rot in the next two days.

Tarasha would be appalled.

Ellana bites her lip and shoves that thought away, but more spark in her mind.

*Market day happens every Saturday, rain or shine, in the large grassy field near the middle of town. Stalls sit in neat, brightly colored rows and sell almost anything you could ever want: produce, furniture, butter, jelly, candy, clothes and jewelry, and decorations for any upcoming holiday. Even Ghehel, the butcher, has coolers full of fish and deer and pheasant.

Ellana used to joke to Alistair that the market is the Dalish equivalent of a mall, though she found that comparison more depressing than funny once Alistair showed her a real mall.

Even so, she missed the market. Every so often Val Royeaux would have a craft fair, but it felt stiff and fake in comparison, like children playing house, compared to a Dalish market. And everyone there tried to rip you off, charging outrageous amounts of money for a handcrafted item Ellana could make in her sleep for less than five sovereigns.

Ellana wakes up early and spends a ridiculous amount of time going through her clothes for the right outfit. She can’t quite remember how she used to dress when she lived here, and her suitcase is full of cheap Orlesian clothes bought from malls and thrift stores, or hand-me-downs from her various friends.

God, if Dany ever saw her in the designer turquoise tank top from Josephine, Ellana would never hear the end of it.

Finally, she settles on a grey t-shirt and one of her old jean button-downs before heading downstairs.

Istie looks surprised to see Ellana as she sips rose hip tea by the sink, just as the first rays of the sun stream through the window.

“Good morning,” she says. “You’re up early. I expected a college student not to get up before noon.”

“I’m not going to miss market day,” Ellana says, helping herself to some of the tea.
“You used to hate market day,” Istie pointed out. “You used to run off with Mihris and leave his stall unattended for hours.”

Ellana laughs. “I was twelve! It’s different now. Besides, everyone will be there and I’d like to see them.”

Istie says nothing to that, just purses her lips and finishes her tea.

The morning dawns bright and sunny enough for Istie to don her gardening hat. Falon rumbles into the market square just as the last of the stalls have been set up. Istie always likes to hit the market early, before the sun gets hot, so she can have first pick of the wares and plenty of time to visit and check in on everyone.

The early start is one of the reasons why Ellana dreaded Saturday when she was a child. But now she hops out of the truck almost before the engine is cut and waits impatiently for Istie to gather her things.

A quick survey reveals the usual crowd: Tarasha and her buckets of thick, ripe berries; Valen and his squash and hand-carved kitchen utensils; Mihris’s sister and their apples and jellies. Even Aenor and his moonshine in the back corner by the giant sycamore tree.

Living in fast-paced Orlais, where trends could change overnight with no warning, it gives Ellana a sense of relief to look out at a market that hasn’t changed in the last fifteen years.

“Come along, then,” says Istie, handing Ellana a shopping basket.

Something strange taints her visit. She can’t put her finger on it, but something is off. Her clansmen exclaim at her appearance. They ask about her studies. They tell her how good it is to see her in one piece. Some ask what it’s like to live with humans all the time, if it ever grates on her nerves.

But her interactions don’t quite live up to her expectations. No one hugs her, or squeezes her hand, or smacks her on the back. They ask questions but pay little attention to her answers. Lirani pokes fun at her Orlesian tennis shoes, but does not offer to fit Ellana for a pair of her famous boots. Tarasha lets her eat the biggest strawberry out of the basket and then charges Ellana half a sovereign. And Istie doesn’t let Ellana out of her sight the entire time.

Ellana hasn’t seen these people in three years, yet they act as if her appearance isn’t out of the ordinary or worthy of any special attention. No one acts unfriendly, but something leaves her dissatisfied. She expected more of a reaction, which is stupid and possibly arrogant.

“Hey, is this the brand you wanted?”

Krem holds up a pack of chicken and Ellana inspects it for the special green label.

“Yep.”

“You know all this organic shit is stupidly expensive for no reason, right?” he asks, setting it in the cart.

“Don’t even get me started on that,” Ellana warns. “You’ll hear me rant all the way home. Come on, I only have a couple things left.”
Ellana and Varric develop a routine. During the day, Varric usually holes himself up in his room to write, appearing sporadically for snacks and coffee. Ellana hangs out with Krem, who has stayed behind this summer with Coach Bull, or she reads in the library, or takes walks into town just to wander around.

But in the evenings they eat dinner together, and Varric is right – it’s domestic as hell; two people chatting with the ease of a long-married couple. Whatever scene Varric has worked on that day usually dominates the conversation, but they also discuss their favorite books, or what shops Ellana has discovered, or gossip about their various friends.

Not once does he ask her about what happened in the Dales. Instead, he acts as though Ellana had always planned to spend the summer with him. Finally, after several nights, she confronts him about it.

“Are you really not going to ask?”

Varric spears one of the roasted potatoes and inspects it. “Well, I was going to allow a chef her seasoning secrets, but I think I detect a hint of nutmeg in this.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Varric gives her a look that would seem dangerously like pity on another, less world-weary soul. “I don’t really think I need to, kid.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re not the first Dalish friend I’ve had. I can take a pretty educated guess on the kind of reception you got when you went back home after three years. And I figured that if you wanted to talk about it, you would bring it up.”

“Oh.”

Ellana doesn’t know whether to be insulted that apparently Dalish stereotypes have already influenced Varric, or grateful that someone understood without her having to talk about it.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” he continues, concentrating more on his fork than her eyes. “I know that rejection and it fucking blows. If you ever want to get something off your chest, I’m here. But I also understand if you would just rather not deal with it for a while.”

Ellana reaches across the table and squeezes Varric’s broad, calloused hand for a brief moment.

“Thank you, Varric.”

Looking at little uncomfortable, Varric waves her off. “Don’t worry about it. My friends are my family now. I take care of my own.”

Ellana tries everything she can to put it from her mind. She reads book after book, holed up in the library or on Varric’s couch. She explores downtown with Krem and plays pool with Varric and Iron Bull. But none of it quells the anger that roils just under the surface.

It keeps her from sleep, taunting her with those moments that play over and over in her head. If she had said something different, if she had done something different, would it have changed anything? Or had they made up their minds before she even arrived?
Varric and Krem watch her with careful eyes, as if she’s a rumbling volcano that could explode at any moment, which, honestly, isn’t far from the truth. For weeks after her parents died, Ellana didn’t speak to a single soul and then she flipped out on Valen at the market and overturned his pumpkin table, screaming like a heathen just because he made some comment about her pigtails.

It took years of patience and therapy and meditation to soothe her violent temper. But now, nothing helps, and that urge to break something keeps building and building until it wakes her up in the dark hours of morning, too keyed up to sleep.

Ellana rolls out of bed, changes into her work-out clothes, and heads to the gym. Iron Bull gave her the keypad password months ago, along with the rest of the Chargers. She slips on a pair of boxing gloves and drills the punching bag as hard as she possibly can.

The satisfaction of the blow and the resulting swing of the bag soothes more than alcohol or drugs or hours of meditation. Ellana hits it again.

Again.

Again.

She loses herself in the thudding rhythm of her blows –

They could see the smoke from the bonfire from the house. By the time Ellana and Istie make it over to the lake, the massive bonfire roars at least twenty feet in the air. Every elf in Wycombe has spread themselves out on towels, blankets, and chairs on the beach and grass. The last of the sun peeks down over the edge of the lake, throwing dark gold rays over the wooden bar and coolers of beer, moonshine, and honey wine.

Ellana can’t keep her grin in check as she and Istie climb out of the truck. She hasn’t been this keyed up for a holiday since childhood. It doesn’t even matter that Era’varlise isn’t her favorite holiday; just the opportunity to feel Dalish again, to honor Dalish traditions surrounded by her Dalish kin, has her dying with anticipation.

Istie didn’t help matters either, testing Ellana’s patience with last minute minor chores that suddenly demanded her attention, or with how slowly and carefully she painted the line of flames down Ellana’s fingers.

It almost felt like Istie didn’t want to go. But, as the Keeper and unofficial master of ceremonies, the ritual can’t begin without her. Perhaps she’s losing the energy for it, now that she’s getting older. Even now, as they head towards the wood pile and the hearth-keepers, Valen and Bael, Ellana senses a reluctance in the woman’s steps.

“An’daran Atish’an,” they greet Istie, giving her a shallow bow.

“Another beautiful fire,” says Istie. “This one might be bigger than last year’s.”

Bael grins, soot staining the red of his eyebrows. “We’ve experimented with new lighter fluid this year.”

“Well, it certainly worked,” says Ellana, gazing up at the inferno that towers off to the side. “The Fereldans couldn’t even dream of a fire this big.”

“Shems wouldn’t know a real fire if it took their head off,” scoffs Valen.
“Valen, we don’t call them shems,” Istie admonishes, but Valen just shrugs.

“Have either one of you seen Mihris or Dany?” Ellana asks. With the darkening sky and the throng of elves milling around, it’s hard for her to distinguish faces.

“I saw Mihris flitting around not too long ago,” says Bael, gesturing vaguely around.


“See ya,” Bael says.

Ellana melts into the crowd, scanning faces for her two best friends. Usually the three of them stuck together, so if she finds Mihris, Dany won’t be too far. Even though at least three hundred people crowd the beach and field, Ellana isn’t as bogged down by small talk as she initially feared. Most of her clansmen are content to wave or nod their heads at her, or point out where they last saw her friends.

Eventually she doesn’t find Mihris so much as he finds her, tapping on her shoulder. She jerks around but he’s side-stepped to her left, a trick he’s pulled on her a thousand times. In the dim fire light, she can see the silhouette of his dark hair sticking up in its perpetual haystack.

“How old are you going to be when that stops working?” he asks. “Eighty?”

Ellana doesn’t answer, she just throws her arms around him. He staggers a little under the sudden weight of her, arms flailing at his side.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” she says, squeezing him.

“Is that so?”

His hand pats her on the back of her head and then his fingers move to trace lightly over her ear, which tickles.

“What are you doing?” Ellana pulls back and bats his hand away.

“Just checking to see if you still have your ears,” he says. “I hear you can remove the tips through surgery.”

“Why the hell would I do that?” Ellana stares at his face, partially obscured by shadow, trying to gauge him.

Quiet and a little strange, Mihris has always been hard to read, even when they were little kids. Varric would kill to partner with him for Wicked Grace. He can say the most outrageous things in such a perfect deadpan voice that Ellana’s never quite sure if he’s serious or not. Over the years, she’s learned to play along with whatever he says to call his bluff, but there’s a layer of . . . something under his joke that makes her feel defensive.

“I hear elves do all kinds of crazy things to survive the shems,” says Mihris, shrugging.

“Well, I didn’t,” says Ellana. “I’m the same person as when I left.”

The corner of his lips raises up in his typical smirk, but it’s missing its usual warmth. “That remains to be seen. If you’re looking for Dany, she won’t be here until the ceremony.”

“She’s not with you?” Ellana asks, surprised.
“Nah. She hangs with Isena and her friends a lot.”

Ellana’s eyebrows jump up. Overly sensitive and bossy, Isena avoided Dany and her sharp tongue like a human plague all through their high school days.

“How the hell did that happen?”

“Loneliness is a powerful motivator,” says Mihris and before she can even process that statement, he gives her a wave and disappears into the crowd.

Ellana doesn’t move for a long moment, watching him walk away. This was not the conversation she envisioned with her best friend after three years apart. In fact, it feels weirdly like she just had an argument. And then for him to just ditch her like that?

Mihris has always been weird, she tells herself. And aloof. And talks in riddles and doublespeak because he thinks being extra mysterious is cool. And even though she thought he had stopped all that bullshit with her a long time ago, maybe this is Mihris just being Mihris. Maybe Dany might be able to provide some insight once she gets here.

Still, she feels disquieted enough to head straight for the bar to throw back a shot of moonshine. It feels like she’s swallowed the bonfire, sending her into a coughing fit like a child.

“Godsdamn, I forgot how strong that is,” she gasps.

“They don’t got nothing like that in Shem Land, do they,” Aenor hollers, laughing at her.

“They sure as hell don’t. Get me another,” Ellana says, slapping the table.

“Careful there, ‘Llana. I don’t wanna find you puking your guts up in the lake like a shem.”

“I haven’t been gone that long,” Ellana snaps. “I still got it.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?”

She stops at two shots, feeling her head go fuzzy and the fire blurry. Aenor seems disappointed she won’t drink her usual four, but Ellana wants to pace herself. It has been quite a while since she drank liquor this strong.

The alcohol numbs the unease that’s built up in her, and she searches for Istie, cheer restored by the power of moonshine. Of course, she finds the Keeper sitting in one of the carved chairs by the roasting table, eating the marshmallows and toasted bread and sausage that any child gifts her.

“Did you find Mihris?” Istie asks, handing her a stick and a marshmallow.

“Yep!” Ellana says, struggling to spear the marshmallow onto the roasting stick.

“I see you found the bar.” There’s a hint of displeasure in Istie’s voice, or perhaps it’s worry. Either way, Ellana elects to ignore it.

“Aenor is very generous,” she replies and steps closer to the bonfire to roast her treat. She misjudges the distance needed and turns it into a flaming ball almost immediately. Whatever, it’s not the first charred marshmallow she’s ever eaten.

Ellana sits with Istie, bowing at her clansmen and eating her weight in marshmallows while keeping an eye out for Dany.
As tradition dictates, once the fire starts to die down, each elf in the clan grabs a stick from the woodpile and whispers a prayer of thanks to Sylaise before placing it in the fire. Eventually, through all the added wood, the fire builds back up again, a symbol of the power of community and how each person’s contribution, no matter how small, is important.

Istie walks to the front of the fire and leads the clan in the Song of Sylaise. Ellana raises her voice for it, the moonshine making her mouth stumble over the elvhen syllables. Then she joins the line by the woodpile while Istie prays with each elf as they add their stick.

When it comes time for her turn, Bael gives her a flat look and says, “No. Get out of the line.”

It takes a moment for this to process (the moonshine has definitely hit).

“Excuse me?” Ellana asks.

“I’m not giving her one,” he says, glaring at the crowd who does not immediately denounce him. “I can handle her coming here, eating our food, drinking our booze, but I won’t deal with her doing Era’varlise like she’s one of us!”

A murmur goes through the line, but it doesn’t sound angry.

It sounds like agreement.

“You forget yourself, Bael,” Istie says, her voice calm but utterly frigid. “Your drink has loosened your thoughts.”

“No!” Bael shouts, pointing at Ellana. “She forgets herself! She ditches the clan and lives like a shem for years, and you think we should just let her back in with open arms after she traded us for the enemy?”

“The humans have not been our enemy for two hundred years!” Istie snaps. “Or do you forget who we trade with?”

“I’m tired of pretending for you, Keeper! And I think I speak for everyone else here when I say that.”

The crowd cheers their agreement, and jeers at Ellana. It feels unreal, like one of her nightmares. Clans didn’t turn on each other. Her entire culture was built around the idea of community.

“Pretending?” Ellana demands. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s nothing, Ellana,” says Istie, but Bael cuts her off.

“None of us want her here, but we kept our mouths shut about it for your sake,” he says, addressing Istie. It’s like Ellana isn’t even here. “But no more.”

Head spinning from shock and alcohol, Ellana can’t believe what she’s hearing. The whole clan pretended to be happy to see her? It sounds ridiculous, like a bad plot from one of Josephine’s soap operas. And yet Bael won’t even look her in the eye and that really pisses her off. Suddenly, her course of action becomes clear: start a fight.

“If you want to say something, say it to my godsdamn face,” she says, snapping her fingers in Bael’s face as if he were a misbehaving dog.

Finally, his gaze slides to her and the amount of hate in it takes her aback. “You don’t belong here,”
he says, enunciating each word with precision, despite his obvious inebriation. “You’re a worthless shem.”

Thud.

Thud.

Thudthudthud.

Ellana punches the bag harder. Faster. It starts to swing back and forth.

Ellana rears her fist back and drills him in the face. His head snaps back with the force of her trained fist and comes back with a bloody nose. In the back of her mind she makes a note to thank Coach Bull later.

A gasp goes through the crowd.

“Ellana!” Istie yells in a tone of anger Ellana’s never heard from her.

Bael wastes no time retaliating, hitting her in the stomach, and the yell that erupts from Istie is downright scary. But Ellana is too drunk to feel that much pain. She leaps onto Bael, sending them both to the ground in a flurry of fists and kicks that don’t land as often as they do. Bael tries to block her fists with his forearm and when that doesn’t work, his large fingers wrap around her throat.

Ellana fights for air, hearing Istie’s screams faintly in the background, flailing her fists on his chest, his stomach, anywhere she can land them.

Someone kicks Bael viciously in the side, hard enough to jar his grip, and a pair of arms haul her off the ground.

Ellana realizes for the first time that she versus three hundred of her clansmen won’t be a fight she can win. She chokes out a breath, trying to break out of the grip, but four hands prove too much for her.

“Take her to the truck, Mihris,” Istie says, her voice sounding far away over the roaring in Ellana’s ears.

The two pairs of arms tuck themselves on either side of her, hauling her down the field to Falon. The smell of perfume tickles Ellana’s nose. It’s achingly familiar and yet she can’t place it.

“Is she bleeding?” Mihris asks.

“How the fuck should I know? It’s too dark.”

“How? Ellana slurs, turning to her right to get a look at her friend. “Dany, is that you?”

A huffed sigh. “Fucking great. How many shots did she have? Gods, I hope she doesn’t remember this.”

Falon’s door opens with a rusty yelp. Mihris helps her into the cab, bending over her to clip her seatbelt in place.
“Don’t – don’t leave,” Ellana whispers.

Her head aches. The world is spinning. She wants to puke and cry and break something all at the same time.

They leave.

Pain flares up in Ellana’s hand, but she doesn’t stop. Pure, unadulterated rage courses through her and she won’t stop hitting this godsdamn fucking bag until she breaks it off its godsdamn fucking hook and –

“Ellana!

The bag stops swinging and Ellana hits it harder, pain lancing up her arm. She will destroy this stupid thing. She will obliterate it. She will –

“Ellana, stop!”

Hands large enough to cover her entire shoulder yank her away from the bag. She lands on her ass a few feet away, looking up as Coach Bull appears like a vision before her.

“What the fuck was that?” he demands, crouching beside her.

Too winded to speak, Ellana just shakes her head. Coach Bull regards her for a moment and then he sits down beside her on the floor and gingerly takes her hand in his. With a gentleness that belies his size, he presses on her hand for damage.

“Well, you just broke a couple of your fingers, so I’m guessing you’re not as okay as you pretend to be.”

“Oh, I’m . . . definitely not,” Ellana says in between breaths.

She cradles her hand, which is really starting to throb, to her chest.

“You ever thought about, I don’t know, talking to someone about it?”

Ellana scoffs. “Who am I going to talk to? I’m literally the only Dalish person in, like, a two-hundred-mile radius of this place.”

“Young friends don’t have to be Dalish to listen to you,” chides Coach Bull.

“That’s not it, Coach. It’s . . . the Dalish get so much negativity from the rest of world. I’m not going to add to it, even if it feels like they deserve it right now.”

Coach Bull claps a hand on her shoulder. “You should talk to someone, eventually. I’m always here if you need me. Hell, I’ll even get you drunk first to help you out.”

Ellana shudders at the memory of her drunken fist fight. “No. I’m done with alcohol helping me with my feelings. It didn’t turn out too great the last time.”

“I hear that.” Coach Bull locks eyes with her and she can’t look away. “Just remember, Ellana: you might be the only Dalish around, but you’re not the only one who knows what it’s like to be ostracized by people you care about.”
She can only nod.

“Come on. I have ice, painkillers, and some finger splints. Those should tide you over until you hit up the nurse.”

The drive back home is agonizing. Ellana holds out the entire way home, Istie’s angry silence making the tension in the car nearly suffocating. As the alcohol wears off, the pain from her fight starts creeping in. It hurts to breathe.

When they get home, Istie guides Ellana into the kitchen, sitting her at the table while she grabs a bag of peas.

Ellana sees her reflection in the window and bursts into sobs, the kind that shake you, hurt deep in your chest.

“Oh, Ellana,” Istie says, her own voice breaking. She presses the bag of peas against Ellana’s head, the fingers of her other hand flitting over Ellana’s face and neck. “Ir abelas. Ir abelas, vhenan.”

She cradles Ellana in her arms for a long, long time.

“Why didn’t you tell me they all hated me?” Ellana demands, once her sobs have died down. “Why didn’t you warn me? How long has this been going on?”

“I suspect it has built over a long time,” says Istie, and she sounds distressed. “I knew it upset many people when you left, but I thought they would get over it. I suspect that once they saw my support for you, they kept their anger to themselves. Truly, I thought the sight of you might wipe away old resentments.”

“Well, you thought wrong,” says Ellana bitterly.

“I did. Ir abelas, but I did. And you have suffered for it.”

Ellana gently pulls away from her Keeper’s embrace, suddenly desperate to be alone.

“I think I’m going to bed.”

“Take mine,” Istie says immediately. “I’ll sleep upstairs.”

“No. I can make it.”

She forces herself out of the chair, and climbs gingerly and clumsily up the stairs, Istie watching from below to ensure she doesn’t fall. With several curses and grunts of pain, Ellana collapses into her bed and stares up at the ceiling until the early morning rays of sunshine filter through her window.

The next morning her hand has swelled up nearly twice its size and hurts like a bitch. Varric takes her to the emergency room, and he doesn’t say a word about why she returns to the apartment at eight in the morning with a fucked-up hand. He does, however, tell her to shut up when she protests him paying for her cast. (It turns out she broke a couple of fragile bones in the back of her hand in addition to her two middle fingers.)

On the drive back to the apartment, Varric eyes her cast and sighs.
“Look, kid, I don’t give a shit who it is: Krem, Josephine, some poor bastard next to you in the grocery line. If you’re bottling up shit inside you until you break your own hand, then you need to talk to somebody. Anybody.”

“Yeah,” Ellana says, staring out the window. “I know.”

“Good. So long as you know.”

And after that, Varric drops it completely.

The cast itches and Ellana keeps forgetting about it and banging it into cabinet doors and tables and the bookshelf. The pain in her arm keeps her up at night, and one sleepless morning, Ellana opens her phone and pulls up her email.

Varric did tell her to talk to someone.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: I don’t even know

Once again it’s like three in the morning and once again I’m a mess. Please tell me if you get sick of these kinds of emails. I don’t know why, but the middle of the night seems to be the only time I can’t keep my feelings under control. And getting them out to you always feels like the safest option. If you ever judge me for them, at least I won’t ever see it.

So I know you’re dying to know what happened this summer. Everyone I know is, some less subtly than others. Varric offered to pay me actual money if I told him and he could put it in some story or whatever. He was only mostly joking, trying to distract me in the emergency room.

Oh yeah, I broke my hand on a punching bag. So that’s probably a good sign that I shouldn’t keep this to myself anymore. Well, here it is. The big secret:

I went back home and my clan deemed me a blood traitor and disowned me. They made this decision pretty much the second I left, but nobody fucking bothered to tell me until three years later. Not even my Keeper, and she’s the one person who still gives a shit about me. She thought they would get over me leaving, or that their love for me would overcome their disappointment, or some other optimistic bullshit.

My parents died when I was seven. These people fucking raised me. They taught me everything I know, they put up with all my childhood jackassery, they were my family. And apparently none of that fucking matters because the second I stepped off Dalish ground, they were done with me.

Just like that. Like it was the easiest decision in the world.

But the shittiest part all of this? Nobody I know seems fucking surprised by it. They all called it: Varric, Krem, Iron Bull. Even your sad lawyer.

And I hate that. I hate every ridiculous stereotype people have for the Dalish. I’ve heard them all. That we don’t bathe or have all our teeth or know how to read and write. That we all live in the
woods like wild animals. That we hate anyone not Dalish to the point of violence. That we both worship and have sex with Halla. That we sacrifice rebellious members of the clan to our pagan gods.

Ever since I left the Dales the first time, I’ve tried so hard to prove them all wrong. To show the world that the Dalish idea they have is some made up fairy tale. That Dalish are real people with a real culture that isn’t any weirder than anyone else’s in Thedas. It’s why I never told anyone the real reason why I wanted to leave.

The humans expect me to have wanted to leave. Their idea of the Dales is so horrible that they treated me like some fortunate escapee from a cult. They will never understand how hard it was to leave, how I still agonize over that decision, how homesick I am all the fucking time.

But the truth is, the Dalish are single-minded and I got sick of it. My people are so obsessed with their own culture that they refuse to notice there’s a huge, wide, fascinating world out there that deserves just as much attention.

And it’s not even the full culture we’re obsessed with, it’s tiny fragments that we’ve pathetically tried to piece together. No one knows what Arlathan was really like, not even Dr. Felassan. For him it’s just guesswork. For us it’s just word of mouth that’s been passed down and distorted for the past thousand years. We’ll never know the truth and it’s stupid to cling to what pieces remain and block out the rest of the world.

In the end, my clan proved to be just as rigid and hateful and fucking crazy as the world believes and that just infuriates me. It’s not fair, after all the work I did, after all the times I’ve stuck up for them. Even now I’ve refused to talk about it to anyone because I still didn’t want to hear their judgement.

But I’ve done a lot of thinking about it and you know what?

Fine.

They tell me I’m not Dalish anymore. That I’ve turned into a Shem.

So be it. I’m not Dalish. I won’t celebrate any holidays, I won’t speak any Elvhen, I won’t mention my clan at all.

Fuck all of them. The people who love and accept me the most besides my Keeper are all my NON-DALISH friends. So if being Dalish means dismissing people like Varric or Krem or Josie as less than me, then I quit.

You know, I’ve struggled so hard the past three years trying to find a balance of keeping my Dalish identity and fitting in with everyone else. To finally be able to pick a side is freeing.

Thank you for listening, Fen’Harel.

~ Ellana

She forces herself not to expect a reply. The shame of her drunken rant that Fen’Harel should validate her feelings last winter break still hangs over her, even if he did end up responding. But a part of her secretly hopes to hear from him, even if she squashes that part and refuses to check her email more than once a day.

But once again, Fen’Harel does not disappoint her.
To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@tmail.com
Re: I don’t even know
Ellana,

Forgive the late reply. I have struggled to find words that might comfort you. I’m afraid there aren’t many, save for these two, as pithy as they may sound:

I’m sorry.

The loss of family is always hard to take, and you have lost so much already. I can only hope that Skyhold will provide the distraction you need until time eases your pain.

As for your status as a Dalish elf, I can tell you this: only you can decide who and what you are. Your clan has no power to make or unmake your identity. Do not allow them to make you feel as if you cannot be what you are.

We all have multitudes within us. It’s possible to be a college student and a Dalish elf simultaneously. Just as it’s possible for the Dalish to both rise above their stereotypes and fall prey to them.

I must agree with your earlier statement, however. It is not healthy to hold these feelings within you with no outlet. That you broke your hand worries me. I am honored that you trust me enough to confide in me, but I don’t believe your friends would judge you or your people if you reached out to them. They seem to have taken good care of you so far.

I am always here to listen any time you need it.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Re: re: I don’t even know

Thank you. You say your words can’t give any comfort, but they have always made me feel relief. I know you’re busy. I know you didn’t sign up to hear about my issues when you asked for monthly updates. But I appreciate your advice all the same. I think about your words all the time.

It’s good to have a friend like you.

Your friend,

Ellana.
Krem starts coming over for dinner in the evenings, mostly because Ellana can’t cut anything with only one hand and Varric has been stuck in a frenzy trying to finish his first draft by the end of the month. He stands next to her, cutting up peppers and potatoes and sausage, and dumping them into the skillet as he goes.

“Your part is easy,” he complains. “You just get to stand there and poke things with a spatula.”

“Do you really want to me to be the one holding the knife every time you mouth off?”

“I’m good,” he says quickly.

Ellana rolls her eyes. “You need to know what it feels like to be useful. Also, I need the potatoes in small pieces or they won’t cook all the way through.”

“You know, if computer science doesn’t work out, you should try being one of those mean chefs that yell at everyone on those cooking shows.”

“You say that disparagingly and yet that sounds like an awesome idea. I could cuss on national television and everything.”

“Well, it looks like your backup is set.”

“Yeah, Dorian would love to hear me back out of Skyhold for culinary school, let me tell you.”

“How about you two stop bickering like an old married couple and get busy with dinner,” comes Varric’s voice from the hall. “The master of the house is getting a mite peckish.”

Krem catches her eye and smiles. “You know, the friends who bicker together stay together.”

Ellan swallows and looks away. “They do say that,” she says. “Now fix those potatoes before the Master of the House gets his dwarf panties in a twist.”

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Ellana spends that next day mostly in bed. She feels sick, physically ill, a stomach cramp that won’t go away, a pain in her chest every time her heartbeats. Istie makes her soup and tea and doesn’t nag at Ellana to get out of bed.

It’s like the death of her parents, this feeling of loss. This sudden emptiness. Who is her family now? Who will love and accept her now?

But just like when she was seven, the crush of sorrow melts into the burn of anger. Her clansmen don’t understand her? Fine. But she knows at least one person who should have had her back. And the next day, Ellana wakes up, throws her hair into a ponytail, and heads straight for Dany’s.

It’s early enough that she catches Dany walking out to feed the Halla. Ellana waits for her by the side of the barn. When Dany finally catches sight of her, she jerks back so violently, half the oats spill onto the ground.

“Fenedhis!” she gasps “What the hell are you doing here?”

“We need a conversation,” says Ellana, crossing her arms.

“I don’t have anything to say to you. If you know what’s good for you, you will leave. Now.”

Know what’s good for her? Ellana nearly laughs at the audacity of it. But in a strange way, she’s
relieved, because they've fought with each other like cranky Halla at least a hundred times in the last fifteen years. This is familiar territory for them.

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell happened with you at that bonfire.”

“Maybe you were too drunk to remember, but I didn’t say anything at that bonfire,” Dany snaps.

“Well, you sure as hell didn’t defend me!”

“Is that what you expected me to do?”

“What the fuck, Dany? We’re best friends, of course that’s what I expected you to do!”

“We are not friends!” Dany yells -- screams, actually -- loud enough to startle the Halla in the barn and it feels like one of them just kicked Ellana in the stomach.

This – isn’t familiar territory. Not at all. As many times as they’ve fought -- with words, with hair-pulling, with the sabotage of their pencils or hair brushes -- their friendship never faltered. They could call each other the worst insults one night and pretend like the entire thing never happened the next morning.

They never fought because they hated each other, but for being too similar. Because one never put up with the other’s bullshit for even a second. Because it reassured them that they would never be abandoned no matter how much they might instinctively push the other away.

“How can you say that?” Ellana says, barely a whisper.

“Don’t even,” Dany says, a level of bitterness in her tone that she had never before directed at Ellana. “Don’t you dare, Ellana Lavellan. You ditched me! You ditched me for the shems. And I don’t hear from you for two fucking years and you think you can just waltz back home and act like you didn’t just forget that I existed?”

“That’s not how it was,” says Ellana, and she hates the pleading that sneaks in her tone. “I was working three jobs just to live! I could barely afford to eat every week, I barely had time to sleep. I didn’t even have a phone for two years. I couldn’t just drop everything and come here whenever I felt like it.”

"If it was so horrible, then why didn’t you just move back home?"

“So I would just run back here with my tail between my legs just because it wasn’t a fairy tale? You know me better than that!”

"Oh fuck you, Ellana," says Dany with an eyeroll. "Stop trying to paint some noble, determined picture of yourself. You couldn’t wait to get out of the Dales. Being Dalish isn’t good enough for you, just like Bael said. You’re not different than a fucking flat-ear in Denerim, so just go back to shem-land where you belong."

There’s a horrible note of finality in her voice, a judgement wrought in stone.

“There’s nothing I can say to make this better, is there?”

Dany just looks at her for a moment, her face a mask of apathy, like she burned out the part that cared about Ellana a long time ago. "You can’t live in the shem world and be Dalish, Ellana. The Chantry made that pretty fucking obvious. When you left for Orlais, you made your choice, loud and clear. I don’t know what you thought you’d find when you came back, but it sure isn’t a clan. We’ve
moved on. You should too. Being Dalish is a full-time gig, not just when it's convenient for you.”

With that, she turns and starts walking back to the barn, dismissing Ellana without a word.

Ellana walks back home, numb.

A few days later, Istie leaves for Market, leaving Ellana alone at home. So of course Mihris drops by in a pick-up truck full of saplings.

Ellana freezes in the kitchen, heart pounding. Dany was bad enough; she doesn’t know if she could handle utter rejection a third time.

Sliding slowly down to the floor, she hides behind the counter, hoping that Mihris will drop off the saplings and go.

She nearly jumps out of her skin when he knocks on the back door beside her. It’s too late to crawl to the living room; he’ll see her through the window.

“I know you’re there, Ellana,” comes his voice, matter-of-fact.

Taking a deep breath, Ellana stands up, coffee cup in hand, and opens up the back door.

“Istie’s at the Market,” she says in lieu of a greeting, trying to sound casual and apathetic.

“I know. I saw her there.” He jerks his thumb to the truck. In the back sit several saplings, the roots wrapped up in burlap. “Come help me unload these.”

Ellana slips her shoes on and follows him to the truck, nerves swooping low in her stomach. True to form, Mihris gives nothing of himself away as he unlatches the tailgate. It’s impossible to say if he came here to pick a fight or apologize or something else. Growing up she loved his unpredictability, but now it feels like stepping on a landmine, not knowing if it’s been deactivated or not.

Unlike Dany, Mihris’ anger is quiet. It simmers a long time and then he lets it loose with one well-timed comment perfectly crafted to hurt as much as possible.

The silence around them is strange as they unload twelve peach saplings onto the back porch. Memories of the bonfire flare up and the weird, tense conversation they shared before he walked off, a portent of what was to come. She knows he must be upset with her. But she also remembers the way he kicked Bael off her and carried her to Falon.

A hope that he might not hate her entirely blooms in her, small but wild.

As Mihris sets down the last sapling and brushes off his hands, Ellana struggles to find the courage to say something, anything. But every time she opens her mouth, the words disappear under the pressure not to fuck this up.

“I can tell you want to say something,” Mihris says, leaning against the porch railing. “Out with it.”

Her mouth dries up. Ellana stuffs her hands in her back pocket so he doesn’t see the way they clench.

“I just wanted to say . . . thanks. For getting Bael off of me in that fight.”

“You mean getting you off of Bael.”
Ellana squirms. “Yeah. That.”

“He was going to seriously kick your ass.” His tone, flat and matter-of-fact, betrays nothing.

“Well, that seemed to be the outcome people wanted, so . . . ma serannas.”

Mihris doesn’t answer for a long moment. He just looks at her, his face carefully neutral, and Ellana feels like she’s under a microscope.

“I wasn’t going to watch you get the shit beat out of you,” he says finally. “I don’t hate you. After two years of nothing, I just gave up on you.”

“So . . . we’re not friends?” Ellana asks.

“No,” he confirms and something in his look softens. “But we’re not enemies either. I wish you luck at your fancy shem university. I’m sure Istie will let me know if you graduated or not.”

He nods to her and then walks away to his truck.

If Dany’s anger felt like a swift kick in the gut, his disappointment hits like a crack in the ice. It starts small and then splinters outward until the whole surface is shattered. As his truck disappears down the dirt lane, Ellana wipes away tears from her cheeks and heads back inside.

It hits her in the middle of the afternoon as she’s reading in the quad.

It’s Solace 10th: Alistair’s birthday.

She flushes with guilt at the thought that she hasn’t sent a card or texted him in months.

I just gave up on you.

Swiping her phone open, Ellana pulls his number from her contacts and calls him. He might not have remembered his phone bill this month, (a bad habit Ellana could never break him off, no matter how many post-it note reminders she left), but he deserved the attempt.

“Hello, stranger!” his voice chirps after the third ring.


Alistair laughs. “Well, a drunk lady did flash me last night, but I have yet to see any cake.”

“Wow. So how did your first eyeful of the female body feel?”

“Well, she was at least eighty, so not as great as I would hope,” comes his dry reply. “And excuse you, but I have seen a woman’s . . . breasts before, thank you very much.”

“Porn doesn’t count, Alistair. They’re all fake.”

“You have no room to talk. You’re just as much of a virgin as I am.”

“Well, it’s not my fault that having sex with anyone in my clan would feel like incest.”

“Just as it’s not my fault I want to fall passionately in love first.”
Ellana chuckles, and a spark of homesickness for their cramped little apartment flares up.

“How have you been?” she asks. “I’m sorry that I didn’t talk to you sooner. I should have called earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it,” says Alistair easily. “College life is crazy, or so the TV says. I knew you hadn’t forgotten about me.”

“No one could ever forget someone like you,” she says, gladly taking the risk to sound cheesy.

“Dear Maker, the relief of summer break is making you mushy. Just how stressful was that first year?”

“Fuck off, Alistair.”

“There we go. Much better. Actually, I’m really glad you called. I have some exciting news.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’ve chosen a new career.”

“Don’t tell me that the eighty-year-old flasher awoke something in you.”

“Actually, I’ve off and joined the military.”

Ellana can’t speak for a moment. “. . . What?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got all the rest of your stuff in storage. The apartment is, regrettably, going to have to go. But I think it’s for the best. We never could get rid of that mold in the bathroom.”

“You? The military?” Ellana takes a moment to wrap her head around it.

“What is that supposed to mean, exactly?”

“But you’re so sunny and flirty and – goofy. The military is going to kick your ass.”

“Thank you for the support,” he says, and she can hear the eye roll in his voice. “And the military is not like the movies, Ellana. They’re not going to make me do fifty laps because I cracked a joke.”

“If that’s what you want, then I’m happy for you. Really, I am. What branch are you thinking about?”


Ellana smiles, remembering the TV show Wardens of the Grey that Alistair watches religiously.


“Shut up, Ellana. I can hear you judging from here. Anyway, I leave for boot camp in about three weeks. I’m going to text you the address, so you can write me.”

“Sounds great.”

She vows to write him at least every other week.
Her own birthday happens just a couple of weeks after Alistair’s, on the 25th. Ellana expects nothing, not after the lavish party Varric threw her at the beginning of break, with the expectation that she would be gone all summer. But to her surprise, Varric takes her out to dinner, with Krem, Iron Bull, and Dorian, fresh off the plane from Tevinter, tagging along.

But the best surprise is left on Varric’s doorstep in a plain box with no return address. Beside it, sits a bouquet of embrium and crystal grace in a tall fluted vase.

“Is this from one of your many admirers?” Ellana asks.

Varric laughs. “Like Cassandra would send anyone flowers.”

“Out of all your many fans, you think of Cassandra first?”

“Are you implying something, Inquisitor?”

“Never,” says Ellana, shooting for innocent, but she can’t bite back her smirk.

“Good, because the box is addressed to you.”

“What?”

Ellana juggles the leftovers and squats down to get a closer look. Varric’s address is printed on the front in the same font as on the box that contained her winter coat.

Fen’Harel.

Varric carries her flowers in and sets them on the counter while Ellana gets a knife to cut the tape on the box.

“You sly dog,” he murmurs to himself and Ellana turns to bust him catching a peek at the card.

“Back off, Varric,” she says. “Get your own birthday flowers.”

Varric takes a step back, hands in the air. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ellana slips the knife through the tape, Varric right at her elbow and eager for a peek. Curious bastard. Inside the shipping box is a smaller, sleeker box in matte black.

She stares at it for a moment, hackles raised. It looks fancy. Too fancy.

“Come on, the suspense is killing me,” complains Varric.

The lid slides off to reveal a laptop computer, just as sleek and dark as the box it came in. Varric whistles.

“Damn, if that’s the brand I think it is, this isn’t some cheap shit.”

Slowly, partly in awe and partly because she fears damaging it, Ellana takes the computer out of the box and opens it on the table. While she touches the glass screen and the soft keyboard buttons reverently, Varric scans the packaging and lets out another whistle.

“Damn, Ellana, check out the specs on this thing. It’s got more RAM than my fucking desktop. This is a laptop for a CEO.”

Ellana knows nothing about CPU or RAM, though she probably better start now that she changed
her major. But she does know expensive. And this computer is expensive on an unnecessarily extravagant level. She plucks the card out of the bouquet, hoping that it would contain more information, with no luck.

*Shathe en’alas’dhea,* reads the print on the card. It’s accompanied by a hand drawn cartoon of a wolf, with an inked paw print in place of a signature.

“So, who’s giving you birthday wishes?” Varric asks.

“I’m sure you already know, since you peeked,” Ellana says. “But I think it’s Fen’Harel. Is there a receipt anywhere in that box?”

“No. I think he knows you well enough by now to make everything non-refundable.”

“I can’t accept this!” Ellana cries, even as her fingers glide over the mouse pad.

“Why the hell not? It’s your birthday.”

“It’s too extravagant!”

Varric levels with her with a look of . . . pity? “Are you saying you don’t deserve nice things?”

“My nice thing from him is a college education. I don’t need anything else, especially not a . . . what does this thing retail for?”

“Oh! No way in hell I’m telling you that. And besides, if this guy can send you off to college without batting an eye at his checkbook, he can afford to buy you ten of these computers a year. Don’t sweat it, Ellana.”

She purses her lips, unable to argue with him. Instead, she pulls up her email and of course there is a message waiting for her.

---

To: e_lavellan@skyhold.edu

From: fen_harel@tmail.com

Subject: No, you cannot return this.

Happy Birthday, Ellana! If I were tempted to gamble, I would bet ten sovereigns that you are currently having what you would call a “freak-out” right now. Yes, the computer is yours. Yes, it was expensive. Yes, you must accept it. You cannot solely depend on the library for all your school work; you need something more reliable. This computer should last you well past your graduation if taken care of, which I know it will be.

If you wish to chastise me, so be it. I look forward to it. Please know that I do not do these things so I can bask in your adulation or gratitude or to make you feel like you owe me a debt. I simply think you deserve to have it.

*Shathe en’alas’dhea.*

Yours,

Fen’Harel
To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Re: No, you cannot return this.

It’s scary how accurately you predicted my “freak-out” (which, if that’s what you believe the young people say, you’re off by about ten years). This computer is probably the most expensive thing I have ever owned. I’m utterly paranoid that I’m going to drop it or spill something on it and ruin it. But Varric has told me, repeatedly, that some people enjoy spending money on their friends and I need to suck it up and allow myself to be spoiled. He is also someone who has spent a lot of money on me.

So this is me, playing on my new laptop and sucking it up. It’s not as hard as I thought it would be, haha. I know you’re not doing this for the gratitude, but I am incredibly grateful. Thank you for everything.

Your friend,

Ellana.

It happens one quiet night in the living room. Ellana and Varric halfway watch an episode of Vicious Chef while they play Crazy 8’s on the coffee table. But the episode is a rerun and they’re on their fifth match of the night and Ellana can’t stop noticing the crow’s feet that gather in the corner of his eyes every time he smiles. It reminds her of something Fen’Harel said in his email about her friends.

They have taken good care of you so far.

And Varric has, ever since they met in Comp 101. Parts of him, like his reading glasses, and his deep chuckle, and the way he adopts lonely people like little ducklings, remind her of her babae. The memory of him, and of her mother, still hurts enough that she keeps it tucked away in the far reaches of her mind. Like staring at the sun, she can only sneak tiny glimpses of these memories before they start to burn. But perhaps it still hurts because she has never tried to confront it – a broken bone never tended to.

“There’s a woman in my clan – Tarasha. She would give Chef a run for his money,” Ellana says, staring down at her plate. “Every insult I ever learned I got from her. She could cuss a blue streak that would last half an hour without repeating anything once.”

“That’s impressive,” Varric says. “You’ll have to teach me some Dalish vulgarity. My friend Merrill is too good-hearted to ever use them.”

“I probably know more insults than any other kind of elvhen.”

Like her father, Varric is content with silence. He waits her out, rolling his eyes at an erectile dysfunction commercial.

“You were right,” Ellana says. “About what happened with me and my clan. They completely disowned me. Well, everyone except the Keeper.”
He turns his gaze towards her. “I’m sorry, Ellana. I hate hearing that. That must hurt like a bitch.”

She nods. “But I’m ready to talk about it and I know you’re curious.”

“That shouldn’t be the only reason why you want to tell me.”

Ellana gives him a crooked smile. “It’s not.”

She describes the strange vibe at the market, and the events of the bonfire. Varric is already familiar with Era’varlise, so she doesn’t have to explain the ritual. He understands the significance of not allowing her to participate. Even with his patient listening, Ellana glosses over the conversations with Dany and Mihris. It still hurts too much to even think about it.

“What happened after?” Varric asks when she’s done. “You didn’t get here until almost two weeks later.”

For two weeks, Ellana doesn’t leave the house. She helps Istie with the rose garden, repairs the southern fence and the dock, fishes and hikes around Istie’s property. She works through all her childhood favorites from the bookshelf in the living room.

She visits her parents’ grave once, weeding the patch of crystal grace she and Istie planted there.

Eventually, Ellana gets restless enough to dig out her old embroidery, steadfastly picking out the tangled thread and starting over.

Once a much-hated chore, despite Istie’s enthusiasm for it, it no provides her a distraction from everything else. She and Istie sit in the living room at night, listening to the crickets sing through the open window and Istie shows Ellana all the tricks she refused to learn as a child.

Ellana didn’t realize how much she missed Istie until they sit at the kitchen table for morning cups of tea. The longing had cours ed through her, a deep and quiet river buried under all the stress of work and the excitement of new experiences and pure stubbornness.

Part mother, part grandmother, part mentor and leader, Ellana can’t catalog what Istie is to her. But she has no bond like this with any other being in the world. Gods, if Istie had rejected her with the rest of the clan, Ellana wouldn’t know how to handle it.

Not until now has she realized just how much her Keeper has done for her. It makes her want travel through time and slap the fuck out of her moody, pre-teen self for every stupid, petty fight she used to pick with Istie. At least now she has a summer to make up for some of that lost time.

Or she thought she did.

One morning as they drink their tea on the matching rocking chairs on the back porch, Istie reaches over and squeezes Ellana’s hand. "I think it's time you returned to school."

Ellana goes cold.

"You don’t want me here?"

Dany hurt. Mihris hurt. But Ellana could not bear the thought of Istie quietly agreeing with the rest of the clan and silently suffering through Ellana’s company.

Istie squeezes her hand almost painfully.
“Ma'ghilan, I will always want you here. But you cannot hide in this house for the whole summer. You are happy at school. You have friends, your mind is challenged in ways we could never hope to match. I had a wonderful visit with you but there is nothing yet to be done with the rest of the clan and I will not sit and watch you suffer from it. Go back. Be happy. I will deal with them.”

“I like spending this time with you,” Ellana protests.

“And I enjoy it just as much. Trust me, I have dreamed of the day you could sit still for more than five minutes and embroider with me.” They share a smile. “But you deserve to be around people who support you. I will not see you waste away in this house for two more months.”

Ellana is reminded, probably just as Istie is, of the weeks after her parents died. How she lay around this house, listless and empty, until she found something, usually destructive, to distract her. And even then, the distraction did not last and she would sit on the couch and stare at the blank TV screen for hours.

“I can ask for an earlier ticket home,” Ellana says.

“I think that would be for the best. But I will miss you, da’len. Oh, so much. I will have to come and visit you there sometime.”

Ellana smiles at the thought of showing Istie around downtown, of having her meet Varric and Iron Bull. Dorian would utterly sweep Istie off her feet, it would be disgusting.

“That would be amazing.”

But her Keeper is right. As much as she will miss Istie, Ellana can’t stay here all summer. She needs to get back to Skyhold.

That afternoon, she boots up Istie’s dinosaur of a computer and opens an email to Fen’Harel.
Elvhen translations:

Da'reth Shiral: "Go safely in your journey" formal

Tas dareth: "Go safely as well" formal

falon: friend

An'daran Atish'an: a formal greeting. Literally "The place you go is a safe place."

Era'varlise: Hearthfire. The holiday for Sylaise.

Shem: short for shemlan, which means "quickling." In modern Thedas, I imagine the old meaning has disappeared and it's now just a slur.

Fenedhis: a curse. In modern Thedas, probably the equivalent of "fuck"

Ir abelas: I'm sorry

Ma'vhenan: my heart/ my dear one

Shathe en'alas'dhea: happy birthday

Da'ghilan: little monster
Sophomore Year, First Semester

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you to everyone who comments on this fic! It’s honestly what keeps me going. It may take me a while to reply, but I will always try!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sophomore Year

Ellana and Krem go halves on a cab to pick up Josephine from the airport. The squeal she lets out when she spots them at the luggage carousel nearly deafens them, and she leaps into Ellana’s arms, almost toppling them both to the ground.

“What am I, just the chauffer?” Krem complains, having already snagged Josephine’s gold and blue suitcase.

Josephine gives him two Antivan kisses on the cheek. “Don’t be jealous, Aclassi. I missed you, too. Come on, I’m starving. Let’s grab something to eat on the way out of here.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Ellana spies Krem rubbing the blush on his cheeks as Josephine makes a beeline straight for a sandwich stand by the exit.

Hmmm. She vows to keep an eye on this development. Maybe even make some bets with Varric.

She and Josephine get a different room on the top floor, though it looks exactly the same as their old room. Ellana helps Josephine hang a lush, turquoise tapestry across the wall and a gold mirror in the shape of the sun, both going away presents from her parents. Looking at them makes Ellana wish she had brought something to remember Istie by, like a pressing of one of her roses or a cross stitched pillow.

After the room looks like something from a catalog, full of bright colors and twinkling lights, they lay on Josephine’s bed and compare schedules.

“Are you really sure about this major?” Josephine asks, running her finger down the list of Ellana’s courses. “Programming? Physics? Calculus? Do you think you can handle all this in one semester?”

“We’ll find out,” says Ellana. Since she’s a good friend, she doesn’t voice aloud how the thought of Josephine’s foreign policy and comparative politics gives her a headache.

“Not to sound unsupportive, but this might be very difficult for you.”

“I like a challenge, Josie. Besides, if I can handle living in a human city completely alone for two years, I can handle one calculus class.”

Famous last words.
Ellana gives herself a week before she admits that she might have massively fucked up. On paper, the Computer Science course progression didn’t look particularly scary, especially after Dorian gave her a brief run-down of the classes.

But actually sitting in *Calculus with Analytic Geometry 1* is an entirely different story.

Just the syllabus alone looks intimidating enough to give her heart palpitations.

*Continuous Function.*

*Implicit Differentiation.*

It sounds like a foreign language to her. Like nonsense. And yet no one else in class looks uneasy about it. They probably learned a lot of this in their high schools. This is all probably just review for them.

*Stop it, Ellana tells herself. You are not going to freak out about this. You knew this was going to be hard when you signed up for it. Suck it up and study a lot.*

After defending her choice over and over again to Istie, to her friends, to Dorian, Ellana can’t back out now. Despite their good intentions, something about her friends’ lack of faith rubs her pride the wrong way.

So what that math is hard? So what that Ellana is definitely a Humanities girl? That doesn’t mean she can’t do it and it doesn’t mean that she should just walk away the second something isn’t easy for her.

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*To:* fen_harel@tmail.com  
*From:* e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu  
*Subject:*

*Dear Fen’Harel*

*Okay, so. I’ve got a confession to make: I finally picked a major and it’s computer science.*

*I know. I know what you’re probably thinking because it’s the same thing that everyone else is thinking. It’s insane, it’s way out of my league, it’s not my passion so what the fuck am I thinking?*

*Well, I’m thinking that I’m not going to graduate with a degree that’s fun but useless and go back to being poor. And as much as I love history, there’s not a damn thing anyone can do with a history degree except go to grad school to get another useless history degree. So I picked computer science because the job market for that major is ridiculous. I could go anywhere I wanted with it.*

*But, and I am only ever going to admit this to you, I think I might be in over my head here.*

*Not, like, barely over my head and all I would need to do is kick up a little to reach the surface. I mean, rocks tied to my feet and then dumped in the deepest ocean kind of over my head.*

*The rest of my classes are fine. It’s all this fucking math that’s going to kill me. It’s only been a couple of weeks and already I’m totally lost. And this is supposed to be the easy, intro math class. It’s only going to get harder from here on out.*
But I can’t back out now. I don’t want to quit just because something is hard and I’m sure as hell not going to be one of those career students who jumps from major to major and never accomplishes anything.

It’s just that I’ve never in my life encountered something that I couldn’t learn after putting in a little effort. And right now I’ve never felt as stupid as I do sitting in that Calculus class. I study and I take notes and I work out all the example problems and I do extra problems on the homework and it doesn’t make any difference.

I’m sorry if this is coming across as really whiney. I just don’t want to say any of this to my friends because they all kind of hoping that I fail so hard that I come to my senses and start being a history major. I’m not proving them right.

Though I might if I flunk this upcoming Calculus quiz.

Yours,

Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: fen_harel@tmail.com

Re:

I must admit, your major is a surprise. I had hoped that you would use Skyhold to explore your passion for history, but there are no parameters or rules to which degree you wanted. If Computer Science will give you the stability you desire, then so be it.

It will be an uphill battle for you, but what little I know of your life experiences show me that adversity does not deter you from your goals. In my experience, anyone is capable of learning anything, so long as they put in the effort. I have no doubts that you will master the skills you need for your upcoming career.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

He doesn’t forbid her from her major or try to change her mind, and that’s a relief. But the implicit disappointment still feels a bit like a slap in the face. Ellana tries not to think about it. He knows, the secret’s out, and she focuses on his support for her.

Until she read his reply, she didn’t realize how much that his support mattered to her. Not financially, but emotionally. She still knows nothing about him, but through their interactions, his opinion has become just as important as those of her actual friends.

Ellana will graduate with honors just to prove she can/

She is the last person finished with the Calculus quiz, double checking all of her answers. Dorian waits patiently, reading a book and sipping on an iced coffee. With five minutes to spare, Ellana
places her at the top of the pile on his desk, a ball of anxiety sitting in her chest.

“Well that took about five years off of my life,” she says to Dorian.

She expects him to laugh. Instead, he looks troubled.

“Ellana, just so that there are no surprises, I want you to know that you’re going to fail this quiz.”

The bottom of her stomach drops out, and it takes her a few moments to cobble together a reply.

“What are you talking about? You haven’t even graded them yet.”

“I don’t have to, I can just tell from your homework that you haven’t grasped the material.”

“I studied, Dorian, I swear –”

Dorian waves her off. “I know you did. That’s not in question here. You just have some gaps, and they’re getting in the way of understanding higher math.”

Ellana bites the side of her cheek to keep the tears from springing up in her eyes. “So, what, you’re telling me I’m just screwed?”

Does he not have any faith in her? Does he think she’s so stupid that she’ll never get Calculus? Is he ever going to give her the chance to prove him wrong?

“Heavens, no!” Dorian says, alarmed. “What I’m telling you is that I’m going to grade this quiz, see which parts you don’t understand, and Saturday morning at eight you’re going to meet me in my office, carrying a latte with the most amount of espresso shots they will legally allow you to have, and I’m going to tutor you.”

Her mouth opens and shuts, but nothing comes out in the mix of betrayal and relief that swirl inside her.

“That’s – you don’t have to do that, Dorian.”

“I don’t have to do anything but stay Tevine and die. Eight o’clock sharp, Ellana.”

The legal limit of espresso shots in a single cup of coffee is nine. Ellana gets all nine, an order that costs her nearly twenty-five sovereigns. Not that she’s complaining. Dorian is already in his office when she gets there, dressed impeccably in a teal button-down Henley and black pants. Ellana looks down at her own cobbled together outfit of the leggings she slept in and a Skyhold U t-shirt.

“Do you ever not look like a runway model?” she asks.

“It’s my default existence,” he says, meeting her at the door and taking the coffee from her hands like a mother grabbing for her child.

She follows him inside and sits down. “Why so early? Don’t you need your beauty sleep?”

“I have a conference call at eleven. I wanted to make sure we have enough time.”

“Is conference call code for having sex with Coach Bull?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ellana. He’s at practice until ten.”
Her eyebrows raise. “So, you’re finally admitting it?”

“Why not?” he says with a shrug. “It’s not as if the entire university doesn’t already know. Besides, the secrecy was starting to become a pain in the arse.”

“Does this sound like commitment?” Ellana braces one of her hands on her chest like a shocked grandmother.

Dorian points a rather sharp pencil at her. “You are not going to use my sex life as a distraction from math, young lady.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

With an eyeroll, Dorian takes out several sheets of blank paper and her quiz, which is curiously devoid of any red marks.

“You haven’t graded my quiz yet?”

“Oh, you definitely failed it,” says Dorian. “But I always drop the lowest quiz grade and you’re going to pass all your others so I didn’t bother marking it.”

Something twists in her chest at the sound of his confidence in her. She sits up straighter and grabs one of his pencils.

“Well. Show me where I screwed up.”

They work nearly two hours but by the end of it, Ellana understands the mistakes she’s made. Dorian had to go back and teach her concepts she had never learned in order for her to fully understand the current material, but he never made her feel inadequate or stupid.

“You’re really good at this,” she remarks as they’re finishing up.

“Well, I would hope so, considering I have two doctorates on the subject.”

“Not math. Teaching. Tutoring. You were really good in my Math 101 class. Have you ever thought about teaching first year math all the time instead of your genius doctorate classes?”

“I have,” he says. “I enjoy teaching. I’d teach all the freshmen in the world if they were like you. But not many students have the drive to work at their learning like you. Most of them want you to hand them a grade. I don’t have time for such nonsense. “

Ellana thanks him for helping her and he waves it off, uncomfortable with the praise.

“Come back next Saturday if you’re having trouble with the homework,” he tells her before she leaves.

Ellana promises she wills, but vows to herself that she won’t have to. It’s not that she doesn’t mind getting help, even though it does dent her pride a little. It’s just that Dorian teaches full time and researches for the university and has a life and he doesn’t need to spend two hours a week on top of when he’s actually teaching her to make sure she doesn’t flunk.

If she can’t pass this one math class on her own, then how will she get through the rest of her degree?

Instead of pool with Krem and Cassandra, Ellana grabs her math textbooks and tries to study the next chapter ahead of time.
If math proved more difficult than Ellana expected, then programming came her as easy as Elvhen. If she thinks about it a certain way, programming is just another language. It has its own structure and grammar and rules just like any other language. Reading it feels like deciphering some kind of spy code.

No, the problem with programming isn’t the material – it’s the people in it.

Namely her classmates. She doesn’t have a problem with Professor Blackwall, who’s got that gruff Lumberjack Dad vibe going for him. But Ellana is one of only two girls in that class and the only one who ever actually shows up. The stares she gets for both her race and gender become unnerving.

Having lived outside the Dales, Ellana’s gotten used to a certain amount of attention. This, however, feels different than last year. Every freshman prerequisite class had a random mixture of students from all walks and majors and soon the stares died down and she became just another classmate. Each class had a sort of comradery that came with being thrown into university and adulthood without any warning.

The programming class is smaller, the guys in it more familiar with each other. It feels like she’s snuck into some kind of secret club without an invitation. The stares keep up, even into the third week, and yet no one approaches her. Class is a lonely affair twice a week that leaves her missing the bickering between Varric and Cassandra, or morning coffee runs with Krem and Josephine.

Even on a campus as huge as Skyhold, Ellana sees her friends all the time, but she misses the comradery that came with studying together or sharing notes or comparing homework answers. Though most of her classmates leave her alone, one boy in particular can’t stop staring at her. He sits behind her every Tuesday and Thursday, his gaze burning a hole in her. It distracts her enough to break her focus sometimes. But he says nothing to her, so she ignores him as best she can.

Until the day of their first test.

Ellana always hates the first test of the semester. Each professor handles tests differently, and she never knows how much to study until after the first one gets over with. That and trying to keep each professor’s random preferences straight. This one only wants things written in test booklets, this one only wants pen, that one only wants pencil, this one is all digital. Ugh.

She takes her time, even though it’s easier than she expected. He is the only student left when she finally turns in her test, and he gets up seconds after she does and walks out behind her.

Unease prickles the back of her neck. Was he waiting for her? She hurries her stride, and the young man pulls himself up to her side.

“Hey,” he says. “So that test, huh? Brutal.”

Ellana spares him a glance, surprised that he’s talking to her when she never heard a word out of him for a month. She debates responding, not wanting to encourage him but not wanting to go through him needling her for conversation.

“I didn’t think so,” she says, hoping that staying aloof and apathetic will drive him away.

“One mean, I didn’t think it was hard, but you were in there a long time.”

The first spark of her temper flares up at the casual condescension in his voice. She forgets to
"So were you. And I don’t rush through any test, brutal or otherwise."

He’s not much taller than her, definitely younger than her, the ghost of teenage acne on his chin. She can tell his human parentage more by the way his eyes linger in her tattoos than the curve of his ears. Underneath his cool exterior lies a hint of anxiety that gives her pause. What if he was just some dumb freshman who took four weeks to work up the nerve to talk to her and he’s too inexperienced to know how to talk to a girl without sounding like an idiot?

The boy shrugs. “Oh, I finished a long time ago. I was just admiring the view.”

It takes a moment for his meaning to hit her. “...What?”

He gives her a wolfish smile. “Come on. You think I sit so close to the front ‘cause I’m a good student? Nah. If I had my choice, I’d be in the back with my bros. But when I sit behind you, I can stare at those sexy ears all I want.”

In that second all benefit of the doubt flew right out the nearest window. Her anger ignites, fast and dangerous, heart thundering in her ears.

“My what?” she says, voice low.

The only other person around is a girl in a crop top kicking the vending machine at the end of the hallway. No help – but also minimal witnesses. Ellana subtly checks for the ceiling for hall cameras when the boy slings his arm around her shoulder and bares her what he must think is a winning smile.

“Let’s get some coffee, yeah? Have you Dalish even had coffee before? You just drink tea or some shit, right?”

Nope. No way. Not today. Ellana ducks from under his arm and takes a step back.

“I think you have the wrong idea,” she tells him, willing her voice to be calm. “I don’t even know you.”

“So get to know me. I’ll let you in as close as you want,” he adds with a wink.

It’s like he can’t understand Common. Or, more realistically, he’s never been told no before.

“O-kay. That’s enough. Take your teenage fantasy somewhere else because you’re not getting it from me. I’m beyond not interested.”

She turns on her heels and heads back down the hallway to the other staircase, before she can do something stupid that’s going to get her into even more trouble, but a strong hand grips her forearm and spins her around. The carefree grin on the boy face had transformed into an ugly scowl.

“Not interested? Do you think anybody else wants a stuck-up knife-eared hillbilly bitch like you? You should be thanking me.”

At first, she can only stare at him in shock. Is this really happening? On a Tuesday after her programming test? What the fuck?

Ellana jerks her arm out of his grip and shoves him so hard he stumbles back and nearly trips.

“Who said you could touch me?” she yells. “Back off before I kick your ass.”
He raises his fist to hit her, cold fury flashing in his eyes. Before she can react, a yellow and red figure steps in between them and knees the boy in the groin with a sickening thud.

The boy falls instantly to his knees, gagging. Ellana looks up to see a slim girl with pointy ears that stick past short blonde hair—the vending machine abuser.

She stares down at the boy with her hands on her hips like a tiger gazes at a tiny, pathetic mouse.

“Listen, piss ant, if this lovely lady here wanted your dipshit frat-bro dude hands on her, she would have taken you up on your racist coffee date,” she says, accent thick and Ferelden. “Instead, it looks like she’s got half a brain in her head and has much better things to do than be the exotic wet dream of some fucking moron who’s only kissed a girl in Spin the Bottle in middle-fucking-school. So back the fuck off, yeah?”

The guy can’t say anything, too busy dry heaving on the linoleum. The girl rolls her eyes, as if in disbelief that she could, in fact, be more disgusted by him, and salutes Ellana before walking away.

Ellana stares at her retreating for in awe before hurrying after the girl without a second thought for the idiot puking behind her.

“Hey,” she says, running up to the girl’s side. “That was awesome. Thanks.”

The girl looks over at her and shrugs. She looks familiar but Ellana can’t place her. “Girls gotta stick up for each other, especially in this shite-tastic world. Besides, I know guys like him, the kind that think every woman on earth owes them something just for breathing. I try to kick them all in the balls.”

“How do you want coffee?” Ellana blurts out.

The girl stops and gives Ellana the side-eye.

“That depends,” she says. “Is this like ‘hey you saved my ass let me buy you a drink’ kind of coffee or ‘guess what I’m a lesbian too!’ kind of coffee?”

Ellana flushes, not realizing how her offer came out. “Can it be a ‘teach me how to kick people in the balls so efficiently and let this be the start of a beautiful friendship’ kind of coffee?”

The girl grins brightly. “I’m Sera if you’re buyin’.”

Sera turns out to be exactly the kind of student Ellana thought she would hate. The elusive other girl in Ellana’s programming class, Sera only shows up to take tests or turn in the occasional homework, which she never makes less than an A on because she’s some kind of computer prodigy.

It’s disgusting.

“Why are you even in this class,” Ellana asks, draining the last sip out of her latte. “Why haven’t you tested out or something?”

Sera shrugs. “Cause then I’d be dealing with the snobby upper level profs who get pissy about the rules. Blackwall is chill. He lets me do my thing and trusts me to know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“Yeah, but you could graduate early. Taking your time like this is just a waste of money.”

Sera lets out a bark of laughter that startles someone at the table next to them. “The government pays
for my tuition, and I'll waste their sovereigns every fucking day of my life.”

“I’d drink to that,” says Ellana, raising her latte.

Sera starts showing up to class more often after their coffee date. She sits behind Ellana, grinning at the creep from earlier when he passes her to squat with his friends in the back. Instead of taking notes or copying down the homework, Sera doodles obscene comics on her tablet or plays games on her phone or naps, stirring only to lazily correct someone when they answer one of Blackwall’s questions.

After a couple weeks, naps and caricatures of Blackwall with penises for hair fail to entertain Sera. When Ellana gets bored, she usually chews at her nails or taps her feet or daydreams.

When Sera gets bored, fart noises erupt from various phones around the classroom, causing mass chaos as their classmates scramble to turn their phones off and swear their innocence profusely. Ellana has to bite her cheeks to keep a straight face. Blackwall doesn’t bat an eyelash, continuing the line of code on the board where he left off.

As class starts nearing its end, the farts increase dramatically until Blackwall can barely get a word out over the noise.

“Maker’s balls, Sera,” he grumbles. “Just give me thirty seconds to wrap up.”

How Sera gets away with it without getting kicked out of class, Ellana has no idea, but she highly suspects that this isn’t Blackwall’s first rodeo with Sera.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Ellana says as they walk out of class. No matter her rapport with Varric or Dorian, she couldn’t imagine pulling a prank like that on them, especially in the middle of class.

Sera stops to stick her tongue out at Blackwall, who gives her a cheery wave in return.

“I got us out of here ten minutes early! You should be thanking me. Actually, you should buy me a cookie.”

“Oh? Is that your fee?”

“I ain’t do nothin’ for free, babe.” Sera slips on her sunglasses, looking admittedly very cool as she strides through the courtyard towards the coffee shop.

Cookies are not the only currency that Sera accepts; humiliation works just as well. They’re sitting by the fountain in the courtyard in front of the Student Union, Ellana plying Sera with chocolate chip cookies while she looks over Ellana’s homework before class.

“Looks alright. Just remember to close off your brackets or you’ll fuck the whole thing up,” says Sera through a mouthful of cookie. She points to the part in Ellana’s code where the missing bracket would go.

“Oh. Oops. Thanks.” Ellana edits the code in her document and hits save.

“So, when are you going to let me get my hands on your girl there?”
Sera’s been eyeing Ellana’s computer for a couple of weeks now, leaning over Ellana’s shoulder in class sometimes to get glimpses of how fast it runs or whatever it is that makes it so special to Sera.

“I don’t know, are you going to program it to wake me up at two in the morning with a chorus of fart noises?”

“That’s a brilliant idea. Saving that for later, thanks.”

Ellana rolls her eyes.

“But seriously, you don’t know jack shite about how your girl even works!” Sera continues. “How d’you expect to be a programmer when you don’t know what RAM even stands for?”

“It’s my first computer, cut me some slack!”

“Maker’s fucking balls, are you joking? The Dalish really are savages.”

“Hey, fuck you,” says Ellana, but she can’t draw up any heat for it.

“Sorry. Whatever. If you let me get my fingers in your girl, I’ll tell you everything that’s inside her, eh?” Sera winks at her.

Ellana sighs. “Fine, but not before class. Besides we should get going soon.”

Sera checks the time on her phone. “Hold on. I’m waiting for something.”

“Waiting on what?”

At that moment someone in the most ridiculous chicken costume walks into the middle of the courtyard and starts flailing around the way Krem does when he gets really really drunk. Every so often the guy will let out an unholy squawk and flap his arms. Sera cackles beside Ellana, delighted but suspiciously unsurprised.

This goes on for a few minutes before he waddles straight over to Sera, panting and pissed.

“You got your three and a half minutes,” he says, accent posh and obnoxious. “Do we have a deal.”

Sera wipes tears from her eyes. “Yeah yeah. You’ll get your stupid GPA. That was brilliant, though. Can I have an encore?”

“You’re positively – “ the young man starts to say but then bites his tongue. Judging by the sparkle in Sera’s eyes, she would have loved to hear what came next. “Thank you for your services,” he says instead, so stiffly that it sounds like a thinly veiled ‘fuck you.’

“Any time. I have loads of other costumes you can try.”

A red flush creeps up the man’s neck but he turns and walks away without another word.

“What the hell was that?” Ellana asks. “What service is he talking about?”

“Oh, I do some hacks for stupid piss-faced tits like him. In exchange, they’ve got to utterly humiliate themselves in public. It’s the best.”

“Hacks? Like what?”

Sera shrugs. “Stupid stuff, mainly. That guy wanted his GPA raised by, like, point two percent just
so he can have a higher GPA than some rival of his.”

“You know you could get paid for stuff like that,” Ellana says.

Damn, if she had Sera’s skills and almost total lack of regard for rules, Ellana would make a killing.

“Eh, if I want money, I can get money, if you know what I mean. These arse biscuits, though, they’ve got more money than they know what to do with. I could charge a thousand sovereigns and they wouldn’t even feel it. I want them to really pay, so I take their dignity.” Sera grins. “Trust me, seeing some spoiled trust fund brat squawk like a chicken ‘cause he can’t say no to me is worth more than what money can buy.”

“You’re a little terrifying,” Ellana says.

“Thanks!”

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: I made a new friend.

Dear Fen’Harel,

Sera is in my programming class and, as it turns out, is certifiably bat-shit crazy. She’s some kind of hacker genius who probably doesn’t even need a degree, but she got a full ride from the government. When she thinks Professor Blackwall has droned on enough, she’ll make fart noises or punk rock music come from the speakers. Yesterday she hacked the slide show somehow and had pictures of random objects that looked suspiciously like penises interwoven with slides about C++ code.

To his credit, Blackwall just went to the next slide as if nothing was weird. It’s driving Sera crazy that nothing phases him. I’m starting to get worried at the lengths she’ll go to get a reaction out of him.

Especially because I’m starting to think that she’s part of some secret hacker vigilante group. She hasn’t named dropped anyone, but a couple days ago all our emails were hacked with links to pictures of some professor in the Criminal Justice department hitting up high school girls for nude photos.

It took about five seconds to fire him, and Sera ate about half a dozen cookies to celebrate. Apparently she’s the one who hacked into his photos and pasted them, all based on some dare or challenge a group of her “hacker friends” gave her.

But Varric says that’s exactly the kind of social justice the Red Jennies do.

Hmmmm.

Don’t worry, I’ve already made a mental note not to piss her off ever. But so far she’s been really fun. She also taught me everything about how my new laptop works, and looks over my homework to make sure I don’t screw up.

Math still sucks. Midterms are coming up and I’m trying to be a good girl and not have another
“freak out” but I cannot fail that test after all the extra hours Dorian’s put in to tutor me.

Wish me luck next week!

Your friend,

Ellana.

Midterms come swiftly and mercilessly. Ellana refuses to go to Dorian for help, so she locks herself up in the library again, looking up video tutorials online when the textbook fails to help her understand. She works extra problems in the back from previous homework assignments, and every time she thinks she’s gotten the hang of it, she flubs the next three problems.

It’s enough to make her want to tear her own hair out. If only she could talk to someone, to work out what’s in her head out loud, but Krem looked like he wanted to vomit when he saw her math and Josephine told her upfront that she wasn’t in a math degree for a reason, and Cassandra hadn’t done Calculus math in at least fifteen years.

A text from Sera buzzes on her phone.

Hey Inky, where you at?

The nickname started a few days ago, as some kind of friendly jab at her tattoos. Ellana texted her reply.

Stuck in the library. Second floor, back right corner by the poetry.

Well that’s stupid. Go buy me a cookie before all the white chocolate chip sells out.

As much as I would love to, I have to study for my math midterm and it’s killing me

It hits Ellana as she waits for Sera’s inevitable roasting over her study habits; Sera is in the same degree program as her. She had to have taken this math and passed it, or at least know it well enough to pass it whenever she felt like showing up for class.

Can you come over for a second?

It takes Sera fifteen minutes to find her.

“Ugh this place is awful,” she mutters, setting her bag on the table. “Books everywhere. You can’t get away from them.”

“I know right? Books in a library – it’s an epidemic.”

Sera just rolls her eyes. “Why d’you even need books? That’s that the internet is for.”

“For the sake of our friendship, I’m going to pretend that you didn’t say that.” Ellana slides over her homework to Sera. “Do you know how to do any of this shit?”

Sera scans the paper. “I mean, yeah, I took this last year. It was easy.”

“Could you explain number fifteen? I don’t understand how they got that answer.”
Frown lines furrow in Sera’s forehead. “Look, it’s not that I don’t want to help you, yeah? I’m just really shite at explaining this stuff. I’d probably just make things worse.”

Her stomach sinks, but Ellana smiles anyway. “Oh. That’s okay. I’ll muddle my way through, I always do.”

Sera groans. “Oh shite, okay. I know someone who can help you. He’s brilliant, but he’s really frigging annoying.”

“I would take Fen’Harel himself if that meant I would pass this test,” she says, hope blooming fragile in her chest.

Sera blinks. “Who the fuck is that?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. Take me to this annoying but brilliant friend of yours.”

“Ugh. No. He’s not my friend. Let’s make that very clear,” mutters Sera.

Deep in the Student Union, on the second floor, is apparently a room full of math tutors. Why no one ever bothered to tell her about this, Ellana has no idea. It a big room, full of circular tables with a laptop at each and a basket of paper and pencils. Students are stationed at each of the tables, some already conferencing with other students. You can tell which is the tutor and which is the student by the aura of frazzled nerves that projects from one of them.

One young elf at a table near the door looks up and bursts into a wide smile at the sight of Sera, wrinkling the long black tattoos on the side of his face. Ellana’s heart skitters at the sight of them for a brief moment, but they aren’t vallaslin.

“Don’t you dare get up,” Sera warns, but the young man ignores her entirely and comes over and wraps Sera up in a hug that nearly lifts her off the floor.

“Ugh! Get off.” Sera hits at his back uselessly. “I hate it when you do this.”

“Which is why I love it,” says the elf, his Antivan accent as thick as Josephine’s. He sets Sera down and looks over at Ellana. “And who is this enchanting woman you bring before me?”

Sera rolls her eyes. “Don’t get any ideas, perv. She’s a friend and she needed some help.”

Ellana sticks her hand out. “I’m Ellana Lavellan. Sera and I have Programming together.”

The elven man takes her hand and kisses it with a bow. “I am Zevran Arainai, Sera’s older, better looking brother.”

Ellana’s eyes dart between the two of them, trying to compute this. Not all siblings have similar features, but they definitely don’t have wildly different accents.

“Foster brother,” Sera huffs immediately. “We’re not related at all, we just lived in the same foster home for, like, five years.”

“We are related by the bonds of life,” Zevran insists, wrapping an arm around Sera’s shoulders and giving her a loud, smacking kiss on the top of her head.

This earns him a swift jab in the kidneys, which he takes with barely a wince.

“I hate you,” mutters Sera, but there’s no heat in it.
“And I love you.”

“You love literally everyone, that doesn’t even mean anythin’!” Sera gives Ellana a disgusted look. “He’s a complete whore, just so ya know. He’s probably got like fifteen STDs by now.”

“I take offense to that. I’m a clean whore, thank you. And it’s not my fault that everyone finds me so attractive.”

“You could look like a bogfisher for all I care,” Ellana says, “just as long as you know math.”

“Ah. A woman more interested in the mind than the body,” says Zevran, grinning. “You’re in luck, because my mind happens to be my second most valuable asset. I would show you my first, but we are in public.”

Sera snorts at that, but Ellana is not deterred. He must be good at math if he’s working here, right? They don’t just let anybody waltz in and tutor unsuspecting students. She just hopes that he won’t spend the entire time flirting with her instead.

“What class are you having trouble with?” he asks Ellana.

“Calculus with analytical geometry.”

“Ah. Not an easy class, my friend. Just sign your name and the time on that clipboard over there and we’ll get started.”

To Ellana’s surprise and relief, Zevran gets right to work once they sit down, looking over her study guide and homework problems.

“I would recognize Dr. Pavus’ study guides blindfolded,” he says. “His A’s are not easily earned.”

“You know Dori – Dr. Pavus?”

“I’ve had his classes before. He has a beautiful mind – and a stunning body to match. Alas,” Zevran sighs. “He will not date the students. I have tried.”

Ellana could only imagine the amount of ridiculous posturing and flirting that would go down if those two were ever in a room together. But instead of elaborating, Zevran returns his attention back to her work. He circles the steps in her carefully laid out problems where she went wrong and reworks the problems with her.

Zevran is not only incredibly intelligent, but also patient and kind. He never makes her feel stupid when she gets something wrong and his flirtations stop the entire time they’re working. After an hour, Ellana calls it quits, her brain frying from too much math in too short a time.

“I believe you have a handle on it,” Zevran says. “You won’t fail the midterm.”

“I started out wanting all A’s, but I think not failing is my new standard,” says Ellana glumly.

“Anything you work hard for should be rewarding, no matter what standard it meets. I have all the faith in you.”

She barely knows him, but the sincerity in his voice warms her. Whatever she thought Zevran might be when he bowed and kissed her hand, this was not it. She gives him a grateful smile. “Thanks for all your help.”

He bows again. “I could never refuse a lady in need. Come tell me how you do on your test, my
Dorian is a shitbag (Sera has provided Ellana with all manner of interesting insults. This is her current favorite.) The week after midterms he stops class five minutes early to tell everyone their tests will be handed back next class.

“And Ellana, a word, if you will?” he asks, as the other students pack up their things.

Not a few give her pointed or suspicious looks as Ellana waits for them to clear out.

“You know, you’re starting to kind of show that favoritism vibe,” Ellana points out as she approaches his podium.

“Oh, it’s blatant favoritism, but since you’re the only student I like, I really don’t care.” Dorian rummages around in his leather bag and pulls out Ellana’s midterm, keeping the score conveniently out of sight.

“You graded my test early?”

“I graded your test first.”

Ellana bites back a smile. “How did I do?” It’s hard to keep her voice nonchalant. She’s had nightmares the last couple days of failing so abysmally that Dorian kicks her out of class.

“I have good news and bad news.”

Her stomach feels like a lead weight is dropped inside. “. . . okay.”

“Bad news: you didn’t get an A. Good news . . .” He flips her test around to show her the score.

It’s a B.

Ellana could cry. Instead she shoves him.

“What the hell, Dorian! That was messed up.”

“I’m sorry, darling, I couldn’t resist. But I do want you to know that I’m proud of you and how hard you’ve worked.”

A blush starts creeping up her neck. “It wasn’t just my work,” she says. “Thanks for all your help.”

“Not just my help, from the looks of this test,” Dorian says, giving her a pointed look. “I’ve seen you go in and out the Math Lab. Tell me, who are you cheating on me with?”

The blush deepens into something that feels a little like shame. “Zevran Arainai.”

“Kaffas, you can’t be serious! How low you’ve sunk, Ellana.”

“What? He’s my friend’s brother. He was very helpful,” Ellana crosses her arms. “He certainly remembers you.”

“I bet he does,” says Dorian with an eyeroll. “I’m certain flirting with me was the only reason he ever bothered to show up for class. He certainly didn’t need the instruction. But, if he knows how to help you better than I, then I suppose I can’t object.”
There’s a hint of genuine hurt in Dorian’s voice. “It’s not that he’s better, Dorian. I just felt bad that you were wasting so much of your free time on trying to help me. I know you have better things to do.”

“Ellana, you idiot, I don’t consider helping my friends a waste of time. I know this might sound unbelievable, but good friends for me are hard to come by. I take care of the ones I’ve got.”

“We’ve only known each other for, like, a year,” she says, though she’s unexpectedly touched by his sentiment.

Dorian shrugs. “It doesn’t take me long to make my mind up about someone, trust me.”

She smiles at him. “Well, as your friend, I want you to have more time to spend pretending that you and Iron Bull aren’t just straight up dating.”

“We aren’t. It’s a purely sexual arrangement, no feelings involved.”

Ellana pats his shoulder. “Okay, Dorian. Okay.”

Dorian’s jokes, cruelty aside, do nothing to prepare her for a professor who’s actually serious. And, of course, it’s the most terrifying professor in all of Skyhold.

Early Modern Sculpture ends normally enough. Sten writes the reading assignment on the board and starts packing up while the rest of the students scurry out without a backward glance. Ellana stands up to join them when Sten looks up.

“Serah Lavellan, I would like word with you.”

Ellana goes stone cold, feeling like a tiny rabbit in the eyes of a snake. It’s difficult to tell, but Sten does not sound happy with her and she immediately runs through the last few days, looking for anything she could have done to offend him.

“Yes?” she says, her voice actually squeaking.

Sten looks outside at the next class lingering in the hallway. “My office, if you will.”

Though Dr. Sten’s office is just the next floor up, it’s the longest fucking walk of her life. He says nothing the entire way, his only interaction with Ellana being gesturing to her to go up the stairs before him. The silence lingers after he opens the door to his office (which remains unlocked. Either his coworkers are very trustworthy or they are as terrified of Sten as the rest of the student population).

Besides two framed paintings – Ellana recognizes one as a reprint of The Banks of Seheron by notable Impressionist Ginevra De Fidellis – the office holds nothing decorative or personalized. The smooth oak desk is spotless, the pen holder, mousepad, and mail tray arranged in perfect symmetry.

Sten reaches into the mail tray and pulls out a stack of printed essays.

“Two weeks ago, I assigned an essay and these are the responses,” he says. “Yours is not in here. Explain.”

Realization zaps her like a bolt of lightning. In the insanity of studying for Dorian’s midterm she had totally forgotten to turn in her essay on the various depictions of Shartan during his resurgence to
popularity during the Early Modern Period.

“Oh, shit,” she says, closing her eyes.

“Indeed. I admit, I am surprised at this lapse in judgement. It is not like you,” says Sten. “Is everything . . . satisfactory this semester?”

Satisfactory? It takes a moment for Ellana to understand that Sten is asking, in his own way, if she’s alright.

“Everything is fine,” she says hurriedly. “I just . . . I’m in this Calculus class and it’s a lot harder than I thought it would be and I spent so much time studying for the midterm that I totally forgot about this assignment. I have it done, I just never printed it out. I’m really sorry.”

“I see. And how did you do on this Calculus midterm?”

“I – I got a B.”

Nothing in his face changes, but he nods his head in acknowledgment. “If you email me your essay I will still accept it, though I will take off a percentage of your total points for tardiness.”

Ellana’s eyebrows raise. Sten makes it clear in every syllabus that late work is unacceptable. “Really? That’s – thank you. That means a lot.”

He looks deeply uncomfortable with her praise. “Do not let it happen again and do not speak of it. Have you any further questions for me?”

Ellana shakes her head.

“Then I will allow you to be on your way.”

It takes several minutes for her heart rate to come down from that meeting, but she leaves smiling.

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Midterms can kiss my ass

Dear Fen’Harel:

I PASSED MY MIDTERM.

Well, I passed all my midterms, but more importantly I PASSED MY CALCULUS MIDTERM.

It took a lot of tears, two math tutors, and a couple sessions with Coach Bull and the punching bag, but I pulled through with a B. Usually I’m only satisfied with A’s, but you would have to pry this B out of my cold, dead hands.

I have never worked so hard in my fucking life at something. Varric even threw a little party for us at the Hanged Man (Cass took my phone or else you would have gotten another drunken email, haha.)

Now only thing harder than my Calculus class is trying to buy something for my Antivan math tutor. I just wanted to do something small to thank him, but apparently, Antivans don’t do small.
According to Josephine, the things Antivans buy each other are five hundred sovereign bottles of wine or an assassination. And according to Sera, who is Zev’s sort of adopted sibling thing, Zevran loves twenty-four carat gold and sex.

And here I was, thinking I could get him some cookies or pencils with funny sayings on them.

Have you ever met an Antivan? Are they all this ridiculous?

Your friend,

Ellana.

---

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: fen_harel@tmail.com

Re: Midterms can kiss my ass

Dear Ellana,

I am glad to hear of your success, though I never doubted it. I have always admired your dedication and determination to do your best. Not many people have the tenacity you do.

And I have not had the pleasure of calling an Antivan “friend”, but I have worked in Antiva before. They are a very passionate people, it’s true. Nothing is done or felt by halves. I distinctly recall a party involving a tray of chocolate rum balls so sublime that no less than four fistfights erupted over them. Perhaps such a desert would be more in your wheelhouse.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

---

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Rum balls are apparently good enough to die for

Dear Fen’Harel,

Your tip about the rum balls paid off! I asked Josephine and she got the recipe from her family. Apparently her grandmother made a rum ball that directly caused a stabbing. It’s surprisingly easy to make them. The hardest part is having them sit in the fridge for two days and not wanting to scarf them down while you wait.

Anyway, Zevran loved the rum balls, and he loved Josephine even more. They hit it off immediately, talking about what part of Antiva they were from, the latest trends from some fashion show in Antiva City, where to find the good wine here in Skyhold. Eventually their conversation dissolved into pure Antivan and I lost it.

He kissed her fingers before we left, but then again, he kissed mine. It’s hard to tell with Zev what is real flirting and what is just his personality.
Anyway, thanks for the tip. Zevran loved them so much I thought I was going to have to leave the room to give him some alone time.

Your friend,

Ellana

You would think the threat of getting one’s balls crushed again would curb any further harassment.

You would be wrong.

About three weeks after midterms, she and Sera and Zevran walk out of the coffee shop with identical chocolate mocha frappes and nearly bump into the boy from class and two of his friends.

“See, dude, I told you she was just a dyke,” says the one with frosted tips in his hair.

(Frosted tips? Creators, even the most isolated, backwoods Dalish hillbilly knew better than that.)

She freezes in her steps, fingers tightening on her cup.

Whatever. Ellana doesn’t want to give this idiot any more attention than he’s already gotten. She wants to walk past him, telling a joke to Sera, as if he doesn’t exist, as if he doesn’t pout sullenly in the back of her class anymore while Sera sits behind her and twirls the hair from her ponytail around a pencil.

“No such things as dykes, just women who haven’t been fucked right,” says the boy from class, staring straight at Ellana.

Any desire to ignore him vanishes.

Her ears ring. Her heart thuds heavily in her chest. An angry flush crawls up her neck. All bad signs.

I’m about to get expelled or arrested, she thinks before she whips around and stalks up to him. He actually takes a step back in the face of her anger (it helps that she’s tall enough to look him in the eye), but Ellana digs her fingers into his shirt front.

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are and I really don’t care, but you’re never going to talk about me or my friends like that ever again just because I told you no. This ends now or I swear to the Creators I will fuck you up so badly your own mother won’t recognize you.”

She is so furious she can barely think, and it takes all her willpower not to throw the boy down on the ground wail on him. She doesn’t want to have to explain herself to the campus police or, even worse, Fen’Harel, and this time there’s no Varric to vouch for her. Not to mention she’s outnumbered.

The boy gapes at her like a fish she had once dragged out of the river with her hands, and it’s clear no woman has ever spoken to him like this before. But one his friends grabs her wrist, digging his thumb in her pulse point hard enough to bruise, and yanks her close to him.

“Oi!” Sera yells.

“Backwoods knife-ear cunts like you have their place,” the guy hisses at her, “and I will show you –”
But Ellana never finds out just what his intentions are because a fist jabs into his throat like a bullet. The guy collapses instantly, choking and coughing, and Zevran hooks an arm around Ellana’s harasser and bends his head close.

“Listen here, my desperate and ill-mannered compatriot. One, you will never get a woman if you have no respect for her or, quite frankly, for yourself, if you’re that desperate and easily wounded. Two, let the matter drop. Take your wounded pride and go elsewhere. If I see or hear of you or your friends again, I will have to get my friends involved in the matter, and they are not so kind and understanding as I am.”

Zev slips off the fingerless gloves he always wears to reveal a simple tattoo of a flock of crows on the back of his hand. Instantly the blood drains from the boy’s face and he jerks back, but cannot break out of Zevran’s grip.

“Do we have an understanding?” Zevran whispers, and the darkness in his voice makes Ellana shiver. This is not the elf who strums his guitar in the hallways and kisses her fingers whenever she leaves tutoring.

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” Zevran releases the boy with a strong clap to the back before catching Ellana’s hand in his own and kissing the rapidly forming bruise around her wrist. “Come, my darlings, we have much better places to be.”

Jovial, flirty Zevran returns as if he never left, but Ellana doesn’t forget the shadow in his voice.

“What the hell was that about,” she demands once Zevran has wandered off meet up with his friend and occasional fuck buddy Isabela in the library.

Sera darts her eyes. “Wha, Isabela? She’s like a female Zev. They bump uglies all the time.” She rolls her eyes, and the hint of jealousy might be intriguing if Ellana didn’t have other things to worry about.

“With Zev. What’s the tattoo? What friends are he talking about?”

“Oh. That.” For the first time since Ellana met her, Sera looks serious. She bends her head close to Ellana’s ear and whispers. “Zev used to be part of the Crows. It was a long time ago, when he was little. He snitched on a lot of them to get out. When we met he was put in foster care for Witness Protection.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Murder. Zev, who makes up songs about Ellana’s eyes and rescues spiders from the walls instead of squishing them and tells Sera he loves her once a day even though she swats at him and tells him to shut up. That Zev has killed people? In the most notorious gang in Thedas?

Sera squeezes Ellana’s hand almost painfully, her eyes fierce. “Look, you can’t say anything about it. Ever. He risked a lot to get himself out of that shite hole, and if he wants to wander around campus being a giant, singing, mooney-eyed tit, he’s earned it. And nothing is going to take that away from him.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Ellana can’t help but be touched by the ferocity of Sera’s protective streak.

No wonder that guy almost shit himself.
As the last two months of the semester sweep by, Sera’s pranks on Blackwall become bolder. One afternoon she skips class so she can cover his car in sticky-note penises. She rigs a bucket to rain confetti and gummy worms when he walks into his office. She changes the password to his email to *im_a_stinky_lumberjack*.

“You are going to get expelled,” Ellana tells her.

“Pffft. By him? He wouldn’t have the guts.”

“What exactly has he done to make you hate him so much?”

Sera looks at her in surprise. “What makes you think I hate him?”

“Are you serious? You’re constantly screwing with him!”

“Because it’s fun! Because he’s the only professor I know who doesn’t have his degree shoved square up his arse.”

Blackwall takes everything in stride. He keeps the password, wears the confetti in his beard without complaint, keeps one of the sticky-note penises taped below his parking pass. Ellana had thought that he had to be on serious anti-anxiety drugs to never lose his cool.

As it turns out, he is only biding his time.

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It starts after their last programming class before finals. Out of nowhere, the Orlesian National Anthem blares from Sera’s pocket at an ear-splitting volume. Several passersby turn to give them dirty looks in the hallway.

“Did you screw up your own prank?” Ellana asks, laughing as Sera jerks her phone out of her pocket.

“This isn’t me,” she says, scowling.

“It’s coming from your phone.”

“Yeah, but *I* didn’t do it!”

The more Sera fiddles with her phone, adjusting the volume, cutting the speaker off in her settings, trying to hard reset her phone, the louder the music plays. And when that song ends, another takes its place, this time a jaunty jazz single from decades previous.

“What the shit-friggin’ *fuck* is happening?” Sera yells.

“Looks like you’ve been hacked,” says Ellana.

Sera glares at her. “That’s not possible. *I’m* the best.”

“What about your, uh, red friends?”

“They don’t do this kind of thing. They prefer you humiliate your own self.”

“Well, do something, because that’s annoying as hell.”
“No *shite*, Ellana!”

They end up putting the phone in Ellana’s backpack, buried under textbooks and binders, but it does little to muffle the noise.

“This is probably _karma_ from all the times you’ve hijacked Blackwall’s lectures,” Ellana says. “Do you think one of our classmates got annoyed enough to—”

“That fucking bastard!” Sera yells loud enough to disturb the pigeons in the courtyard outside.

She takes off for the Com Sci building, Ellana hurrying after because no way is she going to be left with this Creators-damned phone. Sera worms her way through the hallways, people sticking their heads out of the doorways to glare at them, before stopping at Blackwall’s door. It is open, Blackwall sitting behind his desk with his feet propped up.

Waiting for them.

“Hullo, Sera. Do you have any questions about the final?” he asks sweetly.

Sera jerks the backpack from Ellana and yanks the phone out.

“Make it stop!” she demands, slamming it down on his desk.

“Why?” He leans back in his chair. “I’ve got a playlist cued for the next twelve hours.”

Sera gapes, almost in awe. “You have no idea who you’re messing with.”

“No, you have no idea who _you’re_ messing with,” he counters. “I run the computer science department, sweetheart, and they didn’t give me that job because I look pretty.”

By now Ellana is grinning like a loon and Sera looks like she wants to set his beard on fire.

“If you don’t like my set list, then I suggest you plug some headphones in and stuff your phone under the mountain of dirty laundry you college students no doubt have on your floor because I put my favorite song at the end and I’m not going to miss it.”

Sera points a finger at him and her mouth opens, but no sound comes out. Then she closes it and marches out, dragging Ellana by the collar. Blackwall gives her a salute, and she grins at him before following Sera out of the building. The long stream of obscenities that Sera lets loose is louder than the music. Ellana doesn’t think Sera’s truly mad, though. Just secretly impressed.

The entire way to Sera’s apartment, the phone cycles through a Starkhaven man reading a menu aloud, three sappy love songs from at least thirty years ago, and a recording of Blackwall himself reading aloud the entire terms and conditions to Sera’s phone.

“I know exactly how to fix this,” Sera mutters, slamming the door open. She makes a beeline to a kitchen drawer and pulls out a hammer.

“No!” Ellana cries out, but Sera tosses the phone on the counter and smashes it.

“Hack that, you nug-fucker!” Sera shouts.

“I can’t believe you did that!” Ellana stares at the shards of glass littering the counter and floor.

“Calm your tits, Ellana. I’ll get another one.”
“But, all your stuff!”

Sera rolls her eyes. “I backed it all up. Maker, I’m not a fucktard. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have revenge to plan.”

As a sophomore, Ellana gets to schedule for classes two weeks before finals. She heads to Dorian’s office, humming some bawdy tune about testicles that Sera got stuck in her head. Between Zevran and Dorian, Ellana doesn’t stress about finals as much as she had about midterms. Calculus still takes three times as much effort as the rest of her classes combined, but Ellana has a C average level grasp of the material and she’s learned to be satisfied with it.

In fact, part two of her Calculus class doesn’t seem so terrifying now.

Dorian holds his coffee up in greeting. Ellana has scheduled for the earliest time slot he offers, much to his annoyance. Once she sits down, he slides over a sheet of paper with his loopy handwriting.

“Here is what I suggest for your next semester,” he says. “Don’t worry, I included another art class from Dr. Sten, this one on frescos. I can’t deny you your semester dose of Qunari men.”

“At least it’s not a daily dose,” says Ellana, scanning the paper.

“Weekly, thank you. We’re both busy men.”

Most of the classes look on par with the schedule she’d been building her head, save for one.

“Dorian, I think you put down the wrong number for the next Calculus class. This says Math 111.”

A look of guilt crosses his face. “Actually . . . I didn’t. It’s a pre-calculus class, and I think that it would benefit you considerably if you took it next semester instead.”


“You’re not. You’ll pass with a C, possibly a B, depending on how well you do on the final,” Dorian assures her.

“If I take this instead, won’t it put me behind?”

Dorian runs a hand over his face and then grabs a post-it note and a pen. He scribbles something and holds it up for her.

“This is math,” he says. “It’s a ladder.”

All Ellana see is a bunch of squiggly lines. “. . . okay.”

“Shut up, I’m not an artist. As I said, math is a ladder. It builds upon itself. You use each rung to get to the rung above it. That’s how it supposed to work. But you . . . ”

He scribbles a second group of lines, this time with a big gap in between.

“You taking this upper level math is like trying to climb a ladder with the middle taken out, which I know is not structurally possible. Go to Varric if you want a sound metaphor. But, you’re missing some of the basics and it’s making these classes much harder on you than they’re supposed to be. It’s not efficient or helpful to try and teach these concepts to you on the fly when you need help. I think if you took this class before any further math, you would be better prepared for what’s ahead. The
“Just think it over, alright? It’s just a suggestion.”

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Fuck math and the Halla it rode in on.

Dear Fen’Harel,

So, I’m torn. As you are well aware, Calculus kind of kicked my ass this semester. I’m still going to pass it, with a B or a C depending on how the final goes, but it was, essentially, a nightmare.

And this class was only part 1 of 2.

Dorian has suggested that I go back and take a pre-calculus class to brush up on the basics that I didn’t get in high school so that Calculus part 2 won’t drive me to the brink of insanity.

On one hand, this sounds completely reasonable. Dorian is right, the math only gets harder, I am missing pieces of it, and that’s made everything that much more difficult, etc.

On the other hand, it’s going to put me behind more so than I already am. I chose this major late, and the classes I’m taking now I should have taken last semester. I don’t want to have to stall graduation for one semester just because of one class.

And this might sound stupid and completely pigheaded, but I don’t want to take this class because it hurts my pride. I hate the implication that my backwoods Dalish education has failed me to the point where I need remedial math just to get through my classes. I hate that it implies that I can’t work hard enough to overcome that by myself. I hate that I would be in the class with the rest of the stupid kids who can’t get it either and I’ll probably be older than them by at least a few years.

Ugh.

I don’t really expect any advice for this. I’m mainly just complaining. Why have a diary when I have you, eh? And I know what it is I need to do, logically. I just don’t want to do it. It pisses me off too much.

Thanks, as always, for listening.

Your friend,

Ellana.
Re: Fuck math and the Halla it rode in on.

Ellana,

I will not say which course of action is best for you. That can only be your decision. This is just to say that the pursuit of knowledge is never wasted and never makes one “stupid”. Nor is it weakness to seek a better understanding however you can.

Good luck to you,

Fen’Harel

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Re: re: Fuck math and the Halla it rode in on.

I signed up for the class. I hope you’re happy.

Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: fen_harel@mail.com

Re:re:re Fuck math and the Halla it rode in on.

Dear Ellana,

I am.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, but the idea of Sera and Zevran being foster sibling hackers together just makes my fucking day, it really does. Also I am very much NOT a math person or a programming person so anything that I get wrong is through my own ignorance, haha. Please feel free to correct me.

If anyone wants to yell at me on tumblr, you can find me at blarfkey.tumblr.com. I'm still getting used to the idea of talking to people through social media, but I would love
to answer and asks or messages that I receive.

<3
Winter break dawns relatively mildly compared to last year. Oh, it snows. It snows twice a week at least, but nothing like the six-foot blizzard that buried them this time last winter.

Dorian ditches everyone, even Iron Bull, for some beach house owned by a friend of his. Occasionally he will treat everyone in the group chat to pictures of himself with a rainbow of cocktails, or strolling down the beach dressed in swim trunks and an unbuttoned Oxford, or reading trashy crime novels under a giant umbrella. Most of them feature the same man in the background, usually looking at Dorian with exasperated affection. But Iron Bull need not worry – apparently kissing Felix would be akin to incest, according to Dorian, as the pair have known each other since they were five.

Everyone else stays, even Josephine.

“My family is at my Aunt Ximena’s cabin in the Frostbacks,” she says. “I can’t stand that woman. Trust me, it’s more diplomatic if I stay away -- far away. Besides I can’t ski to save my life, and my sister Yvette makes fun of me for it.”

Apparently, homesickness does not extend to annoying family members.

It’s good to hang out with her friends without the stress of homework hovering over her like a dark cloud; especially with Josephine, Cassie, and Krem. Last semester did not leave her much time to spend with them after they all focused on their separate majors.

Cassandra suffered the most from this. Ellana tried to keep up weekly coffee dates, but homework and tutoring and studying forced her to push those back more often than she liked. And when she had free time, Cassandra had tons of assigned reading for her literature classes.

“Would you like to grab dinner somewhere?” Ellana asks the first week they’re off. “We could go to the café you like downtown, maybe duck into the book store?”

“I have other plans tonight. But if you would like to join me, you’re more than welcome to. Perhaps dinner afterward?”

The cemetery spreads halfway up the hillside. They arrive just after sunset. At first Ellana is taken aback at such a morbid suggestion for an outing. No one Cassandra knows is buried here. But when they walk through the gates, what meets their eyes nearly makes Ellana’s jaw drop.
On every grave rests a candle flame. Thousands of tiny glowing lights carpet the cemetery like wildflowers. No other light besides the moon exists. Closer inspection reveals the candles sitting in paper bags lined with sand, but in the distance Ellana only sees the light.

It’s breathtaking.

“Come, let us walk near the top. The view will be better from there.” Cassandra suggests, her voice barely above a whisper.

Many people walk up and down the paved lanes, but no cars destroy the sight with their headlights or their noise. Ellana walks slowly, head craning to see even more lights hiding in the dips and little valleys. Neither she nor Cassandra disturb the peaceful silence with small talk. A few people try to take pictures of the sight with their phones, but Ellana doesn’t bother. No phone camera could accurately depict the simple beauty of these lights. Instead she tries to sear the sight into her memory.

They stop under a pine tree near the top of the hill. The whole cemetery spreads out before them, a sky of tiny golden stars.

“They do this every year for New Year’s,” Cassandra murmurs. “Each candle represents the light of the Maker, guiding their souls to him.”

Which sounds like typical Chantry crap – all flowery bullshit metaphors and no substance. But Ellana keeps her mouth shut because her people don’t even have graves or metaphors. Just trees.

“My brother died several years ago,” she continues. “For a long time, it felt like the Maker was all I had left to keep me going. I look at all these lights and it helps remind me that my brother did not die alone or in vain. That one day I will see him again.”

It’s a beautiful sentiment, one that Ellana will not crush out of pessimism or her general discomfort with the Chantry. If all Chantry sisters had the acceptance and self-awareness that Cassandra has, her drive to better herself, then the war with the Elvhen would probably have never happened.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” she says instead.

“Thank you for coming. I know it is not . . . applicable for you.”

“It’s beautiful all the same.”

Cassandra gives Ellana one of her rare smiles.

Andrastians love the New Year. They feast and exchange presents and send cards and letters to every friend and relative that they can’t visit personally. They burn a ceremonial fire in special copper bowls when the sun sets and offer prayers to Andraste for the New Year.

Varric throws a dinner party for anyone left stranded at Skyhold over break, complete with bags of small presents, like flip flops for the communal shower and gourmet beef jerky.

Like last year, he invites Ellana even though she is as far from Andrastian as one can get. But unlike last year, Ellana actually attends. Varric takes her coat at the door in surprise and delight.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” he says with a grin. “Glad you could make it. Was it too cold to frolic under the moonlight?”
“That, and I won’t pass up the free food.”

“Att’a girl. The spread’s laid out on the kitchen island. Help yourself.”

Krem, Josie, Sera, Zevran, and Iron Bull are already hovering around the food in the kitchen.

“Cassandra’s running late,” Varric announces after checking his phone. “She is praying her respects in the Chantry, like a proper Andrastian. Us hoodlums, however, can start in on the chips and dip.”

Ellana notices that even a self-professed “hoodlum” still has a little fire in a delicate copper bowl sitting by the cracked-open kitchen window.

Varric brightens considerably once Cassandra arrives, and has everyone gathered around the coffee table with their plates and drinks.

“As is tradition, we should start with a toast,” Josephine says, raising her plastic cup of sparkling red wine up in the air. “Something you look forward to in the new year. So, to warmer weather and spring flowers!”

Krem holds his drink up. “To multiple choice questions on tests and not essays.”

“To freshmen who aren’t annoying little shits,” Varric adds.

“To more bread bowl days in the cafeteria,” says Zevran, which is a toast Ellana can get behind.

“Fuck, do I really have to get this cheesy?” Sera asks when the stares land on her next.

“Of course you do!” says Josephine. “It’s New Year’s!”

“Ugh. Fine. To . . . to cool friends with lots of money that spoil me with coffee.” Her eyes slide to Ellana for brief second.

“To the unending victory of the Chargers!” Iron Bull yells, his whiskey sloshing over the edge of his shot glass in his enthusiasm.

Cassandra gives him a look before holding her own glass of wine up. “To meeting challenges with grace and determination.”

Everyone turns to look at Ellana.

“Um,” she says, pushing her cup up against Krem’s. “To . . . passing all my classes?”

“Hear hear!” everyone shouts and then they all chug their drinks, Ellana a second later than her friends.

The night wears on with games and conversation that gets steadily more and more drunk and ridiculous. Josephine, Krem, and Cassandra trade stories about childhood shenanigans in the Chantry during bored sermons. Iron Bull teaches everyone the Qunari version of Wicked Grace, which relies more on strategy and less on dumb, drunk luck, so Ellana actually almost wins.

As tradition dictates, the party ends at midnight. Once again, too much wine has reduced Josephine to a giggly, stumbling mess. Varric offers to let her spend the night in the guest bed and Zevran offers to help walk her to the dorm.

Ellana’s gaze slides over to the pinched expression on Krem’s face when he hears that.
“I think Ellana and I can handle it, but thanks,” he says to Zevran. “Trust me, this wouldn’t be the first time.”

“You know best, my friend.”

Keeping Josephine slung between the two of them, Krem and Ellana bid their goodbyes and step out, snow swirling faintly around them.

“Josie, can you handle the stairs?” Krem asks.

Josephine responds by pushing her nose into Krem’s throat and giggling.


Krem makes a strangled noise. “Josie. The stairs.”

“Of course, I walk the stairs!” Josie mumbles. “So sleepy.”

“Alright, Ellana. On the count of three.”

Josephine lurches forward before Krem can even count down and almost does a front flip down the stairs. Only Ellana clutching the back of her sweater prevents Josephine from breaking her neck.

“So, that’s a definite no,” she tells Krem.

Krem sighs. “Give her to me.”

He lifts Josephine up from the front and she immediately wraps her legs around his middle and her arms around his shoulders, settling against him like a baby monkey. She immediately closes her eyes.

Gingerly Krem walks down the three flights of stairs while Ellana follows behind, ready to grab him if he pitches over.

“Hey, guys,” comes Varric’s cheerful voice. He looms over them on the third story balcony. “That was very chivalrous of you, Krem, but there was an elevator on the other end of the hallway.”

“My hands are full. Ellana, can you flip him off for me?”

Ellana complies. “Krem sends his regards,” she shouts up to him.

Varric laughs. “Go home, you crazy kids,” he says and then heads back to his apartment.

“Is she getting too heavy for you?” Ellana asks.

“Nah. Come on, I’m freezing my hypothetical balls off out here.”

Besides a handful of students creeping their way back home in the cold, they are alone, the sound of snow crunching under their feet the only sound. The warmth of the dorms almost hurts Ellana’s frozen fingers, and she drops the key trying to unlock the door.

Krem deposits Josephine carefully onto her bed. She had started snoring softly halfway to the dorm, so she remains oblivious as he tucks the blankets around her, his expression soft.

“Ugh, I am not looking forward to the walk home,” he groans, glancing outside where the snow has picked up. “I should have taken Varric up on his spare bedroom.”
“Stay here,” Ellana offers. “We’ll split the bed. It’ll be warmer that way, anyway.”

“That wouldn’t be weird for you?” Krem asks hesitantly.

“I’ve done it a million times. The Dalish aren’t squeamish when it comes to this kind of thing.”

“I’m too cold and tired to fight you on it.”

Krem shucks his shoes off and turns down the bed, crawling as far as he can to one side to leave Ellana enough room. Too tired to fish for her pajamas, Ellana toes off her boots and crawls in after him. If they both sleep on their sides, it leaves them plenty of room.

“Thanks for coming out tonight,” Krem murmurs to her, his hair falling into his eyes. “It’s more fun when you’re around.”

Ellana smiles. “Thanks. I’m glad I came.”

“You should do it every year. Andrastian or not, it’s as good an excuse as any to party.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

“Night, Ellana. Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year, Krem.”

It doesn’t take long for Krem’s breathing to even out, what little noise he makes drowned out by Josephine’s snores. Ellana lies awake for much longer, replaying the events of the past two days in her head.

Much as she values spending time with her friends, Ellana can’t help but think that Andrastian holidays are so boring compared to what she’s used to.

First of all, the Dalish do not go to bed until the sun rises. Right now they are still out around the bonfire, dressed in their homemade Fen’Harel costumes to drive away the curse of his bad luck through dancing, song, and general mockery. Every year, Mihris hides in the bushes, scaring the literal piss out of people stumbling into the woods for a bathroom break.

Secondly, the Dalish don’t plan around the future ahead of them. They use the New Year to reflect on the past. Grievances are aired, helped by all the drinking, and settled, either through conversation or an all-out fist fight. And at the end of the party, confessions of secrets that weigh heavily in your heart are written down and burned in the fire, so that you can face the year clean, without anything to hold you back.

Ellana has actively avoided any past reflection. This semester kept her busy enough to only entertain thoughts of the present. She’s thrown herself into her friends’ Andrastian celebrations when classes can no longer distract her, but she can’t run from it forever. Not to mention that having to go along with other people’s traditions made her feel awkward and guilty, like she crashed someone else’s birthday party.

Now, in the still hours of the night, old memories creep in, cumulating into a thought she has tried to bury since she returned to Skyhold, a reluctant confession.

Well, Ellana knows what do with confessions, especially around New Year's. Maybe if she burns it, it will cease to haunt her. That’s what New Year’s is about, right? Set the past on fire and move on.
Slowly crawling out of bed, so as not to disturb Krem, Ellana walks over to her backpack and digs out one of her notebooks. She flips to an empty page and quietly tears out a corner. Then she scribbles out the intruding thought and tiptoes to one of Josephine’s highly illegal “decorative” candles. Neither Josie or Krem stir at the sound of the striking match, nor at the slight smell of smoke as Ellana sets the confession on fire. She holds it as long as she is able, watching the words black and curl, before dropping it into the candle.

In seconds all that remain are ashes.

_I miss being Dalish._

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Dorian is going to be insufferable now

_Dear Fen’Harel,_

_I hate to admit it, but I think the pre-cal class Dorian conned me into might actually be a good idea. The first couple of weeks seemed almost too easy, like I was wasting my time, but now I’m starting to understand what I had missed in my other Calculus class. Last night I even went back into my old textbook and reworked a couple of problems I had missed before and they made more sense. He’s right – jumping too far ahead in math was like trying to climb a ladder with the rungs missing. Or make a puzzle with half the pieces gone._

_I can’t tell him he was right though – he’s insufferable enough as it is._

_But I think this semester is going to kill me significantly less than last semester._

_Your friend,_

_Ellana_

_P.S. Happy First Day! I know it’s late and I’m still not sure if you celebrate Dalish or Andrastian holidays, but I’m playing it safe. I pretended to be Andrastian for this holiday season, letting Josephine and Cassandra and Krem drag me to look at the decorations in town and eating the First Day’s feast with them. It felt . . . weird. But I have nothing to replace my own culture with, so I thought I would take theirs for a test drive. Still not sure about the results._

“So, I have some interesting new developments this week,” Ellana says.

Cassandra pauses the stirring of her latte. “Oh?”

“Yesterday I caught him smelling the sweatshirt Josephine borrowed from him once she gave it back. _And_ Krem keeps borrowing Josie’s Chapstick. He says his lips keep getting chapped, and yet he never seems to buy his own.”

“But . . . that is almost like a kiss!” Cassandra’s eyes go wide.
Ellana resists the urge to roll her eyes at her friend’s incredibly chaste idea of romance. “And it’s the fifth or sixth time Josephine has borrowed his sweatshirts. She used to steal mine.”

“Do you think she returns his feelings?”

It’s the same question that Cassandra asks every time they get to together and gossip about Krem and Josephine. Hope springs eternal that she will get to witness a novel-worthy romance unfold right before her very eyes.

“It’s hard to tell, still,” Ellana replies. “I mean, Josie is happy and friendly with everyone. And Krem is so subtle about it that sometimes I think they really are just friends.”

Cassandra snorts. “Friends do not carry each other across the freezing snow to tuck them into bed when they are too drunk to walk.”

“Awww, Cassie, you wouldn’t carry me bridal style to my bed if I got too drunk?”

“I would haul you over my shoulders like a sack of potatoes. And I would complain the entire time.”

“You are such a sweetheart, Cass.”

Cassandra makes a disgusted noise and adds more sugar to her latte. They wander around the adjacent bookstore, Cassandra accumulating a small library of reading material as they go.

“Pretty sure the last of the snow is over,” says Ellana, trying to keep the stack in her arms from toppling over. “You don’t need to stockpile anymore.”

“This is for the plane,” Cassandra murmurs, more to herself than to Ellana.

“The plane? What?”

Cassandra doesn’t explain until they are both carrying the bags to her car.

“Next week I am taking an . . . unexpected tip to Nevarra,” she says. “I want to make sure I have enough to read on the plane and also to avoid people as much as I can.”

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s a funeral,” says Cassandra almost dismissively.

“Creators, Cassie! I’m sorry. That’s awful.” Ellana scans her friend’s face for signs of distress, but, as always, Cassandra keeps any weakness deeply buried.

“Not really. He was a distant relative. I haven’t seen him since I was a girl. But they require my presence, so I will be gone all next week.” She turns to Ellana and shows a rare sign of discomfort. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t mention this to anymore, especially Varric, until I’m gone. I don’t feel like fielding his questions.”

Ellana nods. “Of course. He is a nosy bastard.”

Cassandra quirks her lips up. “That he is.”

Cassandra’s plane leaves close to midnight. She hands a spare key to Ellana and walks with a carry-on that contains far more books than clothes. Varric sniffs out Ellana before lunch on Monday.
“Is Cassandra sick?” he demands. “Dead? She didn’t show up for class this morning, and I’ve never seen her miss a class.”

“She flew home for some funeral in Nevarra,” Ellana says.

‘Why the hell didn’t she give me a heads up?’

“She didn’t want your five billion questions.”

Varric takes a seat at her table, squishing himself between Krem and Sera.

“Well, I wouldn’t have to ask them if she actually talked about herself. I don’t even know what her favorite color is!”

“Purple and red,” says Sera, eyes never leaving her phone.

Varric stares at her. “And you know this how?”

“She wears those colors, like, all the time. And her phone case is purple.”

Krem catches Ellana’s eye across the table. Krem and Josephine’s will they/won’t they romance isn’t the only juicy gossip Ellana indulges in – Sera’s doomed infatuation provides many hours of riveting conversation.

“I see,” says Varric, looking a little mystified. Even after a couple of months, he still doesn’t know what to make of Sera. “Well, I’m still miffed.”

“Your miffed state of mind is duly noted,” says Ellana. “You want my orange?”

Besides pointed remarks about Varric, Ellana has kept her suspicions about Varric’s feelings for Cassandra to herself. There isn’t enough even to gossip about – Varric and Cassandra both play their cards very close to their chests. (Varric literally and figuratively.) But she files this moment away, adding it to the tally she keeps running in the back of her head.

Though Ellana has a meal plan, once or twice a week she still cooks dinner at Varric’s place. He got spoiled by the food over the summer and she by the kitchen space, so they have continued their arrangement even after classes started and Ellana moved back in with Josephine.

The Wednesday after Cassandra left, she and Varric are splitting a pint of ice cream in the living room, flipping through their phones while the news plays on in the background.

“The funeral for Vestalus Pentaghast was held today. Though fifteenth in line for the throne and not well known outside of Nevarra, the street to the Grand Necropolis was packed with mourners and spectators alike.”

Varric and Ellana both look up at the television, interest piqued. Throngs of people line the street where the funeral procession carries an ornate white coffin in a carriage drawn by pristine white horses.

“You see that crowd walking behind the carriage?” Varric says, pointing with his spoon. “That’s the entire royal family.”

Ellana’s eyebrows raise. “It’s huge! There’s got to be, like, a hundred people there.”
“A hundred and eight, but who’s counting?” says Varric.

“Vestalus had no heirs of his own,” the announcer continues, “but he is survived by his niece and adopted daughter, Cassandra Pentaghast.”

The camera zooms onto the unmistakable figure of Cassandra, their Cassandra, just as Varric starts choking on a bite of cookies and cream.

Ellana pats his back as he regains composure, eyes never leaving the TV screen. Dressed in a black velvet dress that touches the ground, Cassandra walks regally with the rest of the royal family – her family – her gaze never wavering from the carriage in front of her.

And if any confusion remained, the golden circlet that glitters in her hair destroys it.

The news anchor delves into a brief summary of Nevarran funeral practices, which Ellana pays no attention to.

“You are shitting me,” Varric finally gasps once he catches his breath.

“No wonder she doesn’t talk about herself that much,” Ellana says. “How the hell do you even explain that?”

“I knew she was holding out on me, but royalty? A goddamn princess?”

They watch the entire procession, ice cream promptly forgotten, looking for glimpses of their friend. Ellana tries to wrap her head around it, but it still doesn’t sink in, even when faced with the video footage of Cassandra mingling with the royal family.

Cassandra, obsessed with smutty romance books.

Cassandra, who sent Coach Bull sprawling on the ground with a lacrosse stick after he told her women shouldn’t be in the military.

Cassandra, who hustled Varric at pool.

Cassandra, who’s apparently a disgustingly wealthy foreign princess.

It just does not compute. It sounds like something straight out of one of her romance novels.

“I bet you right now she’s utterly miserable in that dress,” says Varric. “Look at her face. She wants to throat-punch about twenty people right now.”

Ellana cracks up at the clearly miserable expression on Cassandra’s face. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen her wear a dress, actually.”

“And unless any more of her family start dropping like flies, it will be the last time.”

Ellana turns to him. “You are never going to let her live this down, are you?”

He grins in a way that is almost scary. “Not for all the sovereigns in the world.”

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Long lost princesses

Dear Fen’Harel,

Remember my friend Cassandra? She’s tall and awkward and can knock a grown man on his ass with just her fists.

Cassandra Pentaghast is apparently Cassandra Pentaghast, part of the royal family in Nevarra. Like, holy shit. Varric and I had no idea until we saw her on the news in the funeral procession for some other royal Pentaghast.

Varric is a little pissed that she kept that to herself for so long, but I can understand the secrecy. Cassandra, as much as I love her, is about as far from the image of “princess” as one could possibly get. I wouldn’t want the mockery either.

The one person who isn’t surprised by this is Josephine, who apparently knew since the first day she met Cassandra. Even though the Montilyets aren’t royalty, Josephine learned the names of all the royal families still left in Thedas as part of her self-imposed “diplomacy training” when she was a kid. That she could also keep the secret with such a straight face probably means that Josephine will become one hell of a diplomat.

Or professional spy.

Cassandra doesn’t get back until this Sunday. Varric’s building a thousand and one jokes and nicknames to drop at random times for the rest of her life (or the rest of his if she doesn’t kill him first), but I think I’m just going to continue to act as though I don’t know. It’s what she wants, anyway. But I am sorry to say, you are no longer my wealthiest, most interesting friend.

Your friend,

Ellana

Cassandra returns to Skyhold as quietly as she had left it, appearing Monday morning with Varric, both making a beeline to the student union coffee shop.

“Cass!” Ellana shouts. She picks up her pace, rushing towards them, and throws her arms around Cassandra, whose arms flail for a moment before patting Ellana awkwardly on the back.

“Ellana!” Varric gasps, a hand on his chest. “Where is your decorum? That is a princess of Nevarra you’re manhandling!”

Cassandra steps out of Ellana’s embrace and glares down at Varric. “What did you call me?”

“Are you not Her Royal Highness of Nevarra, Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera Filomena –”

“Stop!” Cassandra yells, thunderous. “Where did you hear that?”

Anyone else would have seen their life flash before their eyes at the glare on Cassandra’s face, but Varric just smiles sweetly.

“We saw you on the news. In the funeral procession.”

“No.” Cassandra closes her eyes, shoulders slumping. “Oh no. How many people know?”
“Just us,” says Ellana.

“By the way, did anyone tell you how stunning you looked in that velvet gown?” Varric adds.

Cassandra flushes, a deep red that she attempts to cover up with bluster and threats for Varric to keep his mouth shut. Threats that Varric replies with vague promises and lies and a complete lack of fear that drives Cassandra even crazier. Ellana walks behind them, watches the show, and wonders if she should talk to Varric about the meaning of irony.

It takes a few weeks after the start of the term, but Ellana notices the distinctive lack of the classmate who harassed her last semester (affectionately referred to as “Douchebag McGee” by Sera). At first, she chalked it up to there being more than one session of her programming class that he could belong in. But ever since he tried to get his friends involved, Ellana has kept tabs on him in the back of her mind, an awareness so she would be prepared to deck him and then report him if he ever tried anything again.

Thanks to Zevran, Douchebag McGee and Company were too terrified to even look Ellana in the eye for the rest of the semester, but she caught flashes of him in the Quad or the cafeteria or the Comp Sci building.

But not this semester. Maybe he transferred. Or maybe Zevran called in his favor . . .

“Remember Douchebag McGee?” Ellana asks Sera on their way to their programming class.

“Ugh, I’m trying not to.”

“I haven’t seen him around campus this semester. Did . . . something happen to him?”

Sera has the uncanny ability to walk with her eyes glued to her phone and never so much as step on a crack in the sidewalk and she uses it now to avoid Ellana.

“Oh yeah -- he got expelled,” she says, thumbs flying over the keyboard.

“What? When?”

“Over break. They found some blog of his full of racist posts about everyone from elves to Tevinter. The one about Ferelden dog-fuckers was especially enlightening.”

Ellana’s eyebrows climb up. “Wow. He was that stupid to post all of it on the internet?”

“Mmm-hmmm,” says Sera and she is pointedly not looking at anything but her phone. “I mean, you met him. He’s not exactly the cream of the crop.”

Ellana gives her the side eye. “How did you find that blog?”

“It went viral. Everyone saw it.”

“I didn’t see it.”

“You don’t have blogs. You don’t even have a ThedasBook for god’s sake. Of course you didn’t see it.”

“Did you have something to do with this?”
Sera snorts. “Don’t be stupid. It would be illegal to hack into his blog and create a bunch of fake posts spouting a bunch of racist bullshit and then back date it to several months ago and then have one post go viral and with a bunch of other fake social media accounts demanding answers blow up the Skyhold feed until the dean has to expel him in order to save their reputation.”

“Yeah,” says Ellana, grinning to herself, “that is very illegal, and you’re too much of an upstanding citizen to ever do such a thing.”

“Exactly fucking right.”

Ellana drapes her arm around Sera’s shoulders and they head to another day of book-learning and Blackwall torture and Sera lets it sit there for a moment before shrugging it off.

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Krem has made a new enemy

Dear Fen’Harel,

Did you know that squirrels can hold grudges? It may sound like the lead-up to a punchline, but I’m actually dead serious. Their tiny brains can’t remember where they hid their acorns, but they can memorize Krem’s face and follow him on campus, pelting him with acorns and sticks.

I don’t know what he did to piss this one off, but goddamn. It is relentless. I have never seen squirrels act like this before, but then again, I’ve only seen squirrels in the woods. Campus squirrels are a lot more fearless. They sometimes eat out of my hand, and they don’t get out of the way on the sidewalks unless you pound your feet real close to them.

This squirrel acts like Krem murdered its whole family and it’s sworn a blood oath to destroy him. It’s ripped a sandwich right out of Krem’s hand. It throws things at him. It’s even tried to ambush him from the trees. Krem walks through the middle of the grass now, no matter how muddy or snowy it is.

We can tell it’s the same squirrel because it has these little tufts of hair over its eyes that make it look like a pissed off old man.

Krem’s been asking me for ways to make amends before he gets rabies, but I’m honestly at a loss.

Your friend,

Ellana

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: A rivalry that can only end in blood.

Dear Fen’Harel,
Today has been the warmest day since fall. Spring is upon us! Naturally, Krem and I took our studying outside and it went great for the first five minutes.

And then a little squirrel hopped closer and closer and it wasn’t until it was too late that we noticed its evil white eyebrows. It jumped up on Krem’s textbook and I thought Krem was going to have a heart attack. He stood so still that you could barely see him breathing.

But the squirrel was not out for blood today – he just vomited all over the book and then scampered off before Krem or I could react.

Is this real? Am I in a children’s movie? Is there an evil Squirrel King directing any of this?

Your friend,

Ellana

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To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@tmail.com
Re: A rivalry that can only end in blood.

Dear Ellana,

Have you or your friend possibly considered calling in animal control? They could detain the squirrel and then release it in the wild with no harm done. I fear what comes next in this terrifying tale. What if you become collateral damage?

Your friend,

Fen’Harel

P.S. What would a Squirrel King ransom you for?

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To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Re:re: A rivalry that can only end in blood.

Dear Fen’Harel,

Animal Control is a no-go. Krem looked at me totally affronted for suggesting it and told me this was a “war between men” and that they would settle it like men, rather than running to the authorities to solve their problems for them.

So I guess that means the Squirrel King will stay out of this skirmish.

Your friend,

Ellana

P.S. I’m tempted to say nuts, but there a voice giggling in the back of my head that sounds very
much like Sera, so I’m going to say dominion over the Quad, as any mad king might want.

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Cabin Fever.

Dear Fen’Harel,

I miss trees.

Real trees, not the carefully manicured ones that dot the campus.

The weather is finally warm and full of sun and flowers are popping up and I really want to go hiking. Like, real hiking. Deer trail kind of hiking, not walking down a sculpted dirt path in the middle of a cleared-off wood. But I don’t think there is any place like that here, at least not a place where I wouldn’t get in trouble for trespassing.

I have had the urge to go hiking before, but I’ve learned to kind of squash it, because Val Royeaux has nothing but cute little parks as the only greenery around that makes Skyhold look like the untamed wilds of the Anderfels. But with the weather changing and the flowers coming out, I’m starting to go a bit stir crazy. I’ve tried asking around, but Dorian and Varric only care about book stores and wine shops and Coach Bull can rattle off every gym in a ten mile radius, but none of them know or care about hiking or nature.

Your friend,

Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@mail.com

Re: Cabin Fever

Dear Ellana,

I’ve included screencaps from ThedasMaps of Anadal State Park. It’s roughly a twenty minute drive or bus ride from Skyhold University and it offers a wide range of hiking trails, from beginners to enthusiasts like yourself. If the urge to get up and stretch your legs continues, this place may have what you need.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Re: Re: Cabin Fever

Dear Fen’Harel,

Thank you so much for the tip! Cassandra and I checked it out today. The forest is gorgeous and after only five minutes of walking, I couldn’t hear the traffic anymore – just wind and birdsong. Walking around seeing nothing but woods for a good long while soothed the part of me that is always homesick. It’s not the same as being back in the Dales – the trees and the smells and the slant of sunlight is different – but it still restored something in my soul that’s been missing for too long.

I’ve included some of the pictures we took. You can even see a blurry piece of Cassandra’s hand as she tries to cover her face (she hates having her picture taken).

Your friend,

Ellana

“So, Josephine’s birthday is coming up and I have no fucking clue what to do,” says Krem. “What are you doing?”

“Spa Day,” says Ellana. “It’s a thing now. We get weird little cucumbers on our eyes and sweat in a wooden box and get massages. Then we go out for sushi. Her present is that she gets to drag me along.”

“Thanks, but that’s not very helpful to me,” Krem grumbles.

“Get her a gift card. You can’t go wrong with those.”

“A gift card?” Krem says flatly. “You want me to get an incredibly wealthy woman who could buy anything she wanted a gift card? Could there be a lazier, shittier gift?”

Ellana keeps her eyes on her soup and her voice nonchalant. “Is there any particular reason why you’re freaking out more this year than last year?”

“Last year we barely knew each other. All I had to do was get her a card with a baby mabari on it. Now we’re actual friends. The stakes have been raised. Besides, for my birthday she bought me a pair of two hundred sovereign headphones. I have to at least attempt to get her something nice.”

“Oh, that’s easy.” Sera appears, with a massive bag of contraband cheese puffs (food bought outside the cafeteria is prohibited) in one hand and her laptop in the other. “You’re talking about Josephine, right?”

“Of course he is,” says Ellana and Krem shoots her a Look.

Sera opens her laptop and pulls up a website before turning her computer around to show them.

“What is this?” Krem asks.

“It’s her BookNook.”

“Her what?”

Sera rolls her eyes. “It’s a website where people blog about their favorite books and make wishlists
of books they want to read and shit. Look, these are all the books on her wishlist. Just get her one of those.”

Krem peers at the site, scanning each book.

“He’s got his thinking face on,” Ellana says.

“Shut up. How did you know Josephine had something like this? Did you hack her computer?”

“No, I didn’t hack anything! It’s a public blog.” Sera rolls her eyes. “Josephine reads a lot and she’s disgustingly organized, so I figured she would have something like this.”

Krem grabs a pen out of his messenger bag and starts scribbling titles on a stray napkin.

“Thanks, Sera. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I’m not done yet. I think I’ve got your squirrel problem figured out.” Sera’s fingers fly over the keyboard, pulling up what looks like a web forum. “Apparently, it’s not that weird to have freaky little squirrel rebellions on college campuses. Here’s an entire forum thread dedicated to college kids and their squirrel nemesis. I skimmed the comments, and I think this guy has something that might work for you.”

She shoves the laptop over to Krem and he reads the screen, eyebrows climbing steadily up his forehead.

“I call bullshit,” he says, pushing the computer away. “He’s obviously a troll. There’s no way he actually did that.”

Sera shrugs. “Other people tried it, they said it worked. But if you don’t want to, it’s no skin off my nose. Just thought I’d be helpful.”

Krem looks as if he isn’t sure whether or not to believe her.

Krem: Hey

Krem: You got any peanut butter?

Ellana looks blearily at her phone, squinting at the time.

1:34 AM

Ellana: . . .yes

Krem: Can I come over and get some?

Ellana: OMG you are not serious. Sera is bullshitting you.

Krem: Listen, this fucker has been screaming outside my bedroom window. It's either try Sera's batshit crazy scheme or lose my freaking mind.

Ellana: Fine. I'll be out in the Quad in five.
Wrapped up in a sweatshirt and scuffed boots, Ellana sneaks across the quad to Krem’s dorm, feeling a bit like a cat burglar in a heist movie. As she gets closer to his window, she can indeed hear a strange screaming noise from high up in the trees.

“So, the post said to cover acorns from the tree in peanut butter.”

Krem’s voice appears in the dark somewhere beside her and Ellana nearly screams.

“Don’t fucking do that,” she hisses.

“Sorry.” She can barely see his profile in the light of a distant street lamp. “Anyway, supposedly you’re supposed to place the acorns in little pyramids as a trail from one tree to another.”

Ellana just stares at him. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“No shit. But at least seven people on that thread tried it and they said it got the squirrel to leave them alone. Apparently, this squirrel lives in the tree right next to my window and that pisses him off because of territorial bullshit. And if I lead him to another tree and he likes it, then he leaves this tree – and me – the fuck alone.”

“You know this sounds insane, right?”

“Oh, I’m well aware. But I am also really fucking desperate and I think Stitches is going to murder me in my sleep if I don’t fix this.”

Ellana sighs. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

They unscrew the peanut butter open and grab acorns from the little pile Krem collected. Ellana scoops the acorns in generous globs of peanut butter while Krem builds miniature stacks and spaces them out from the tree by his window to another tree twenty feet away.

It takes them almost an entire hour and over half the jar of peanut butter.

“Is that it?” Ellana asks, silently begging for the answer to be yes. Her fingers are cold to the bone.

“One more step,” Krem mutters. He pulls out a dog whistle. “This is supposed to get him down from the tree. Squirrels love the sound.”

He puts the whistle up to his mouth and a few seconds later Ellana hears the distant barking of the dogs in the campus apartments.

Light flashes in front of them, bright enough to send them reeling. Blinking back spots, Ellana hears a familiar cackling.

“Andraste’s tits! I can’t fucking believe you fell for it!”

“Sera!” Krem growls.

He lunges for her, stumbling, but neither of them can see her between the flash of the camera and the darkness of night. Sera’s cackling grows fainter as she sprints away and disappears.

“I’m going to fucking kill her,” Krem hisses. He kicks viciously at the grass.

“Tomorrow,” Ellana promises, fighting a yawn. “I’m going to bed.”
To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: It’s time for revenge

Dear Fen’Harel,

Attached is a picture featured on multiple blogs and the front page of our school’s website. It’s too blurry to make out the exact features of me and Krem, but trust me. It’s me and Krem.

Sera took this picture after she somehow convinced Krem that the solution to his squirrel problem is to make little piles of peanut butter covered acorns and blow a dog whistle.

She did this by making up an entire forum thread about college squirrel attacks, including the fake accounts of everyone who commented on the original post and then crawled up in a tree with squirrel noises playing on her phone to wake Krem up in the middle of the night so he would be stupid and desperate enough to try it.

And of course, I’m stupid enough to try and help him when he texts me at three in the morning.

It’s genius, actually, and completely evil. I have to admire it.

Krem isn’t mad at Sera so much as he is with himself for falling for it. But Sera has the uncanny ability to get into your head.

Your friend,

Ellana
Midterms sidle in right before the spring break. They nearly catch Ellana by surprise. Three successful semesters and an ever-growing circle of friends has made Ellana take a more relaxed view of her studies. She no longer starts her homework the day it’s assigned or studies for a test two weeks in advance.

So, when Ellana walks in after her nightly workout with Krem to see Josephine sitting on the bed with her notes scattered around her like confetti, the realization hits her like one of Bull’s Chargers.

“Oh shit,” she says.

Josephine looks up from her tablet. “What’s wrong?”

“You forgot?” Josephine’s eyebrows raise.

Ellana dives for her desk, grabbing the binder reserved just for class syllabi, checking the assigned times and dates for each test. Her anxiety flares up, the sticky, hot fear of failure. If she buckles down now and skips coffee with Cassandra, she should make it. She has two papers due and a hell of a lot of notes to study.

“Shhh. Quiet my friends. Here we have a rare sighting of the Ellana Lavellan in her natural habitat.”

Zevran peeks his head around a bookshelf, holding up his phone as if filming her. Ellana sticks her middle finger at him – not that such vulgarity would ever stop Zevran from posting it. He drops gracefully into the chair across from her.

“I would be careful when heading into your dorm tonight,” he tells her. “Sera has been most put out that you’ve been so busy this week. I fear something awaits you.”

Ellana snorts. “There’s this thing called studying that us lesser mortals have to do to pass.”

“But do you know what you really need, I wonder?”

“On a scale of one to ten, how suggestive will this be?”

He grins. “You know, of course, that I would give you the most amazing night of your life if you would but just give the word. But no, I am suggesting you go dancing.”

Ellana’s eyebrows raise. “Dancing? Are you serious?”
“Have you not been dancing before?”

“Oh, I’ve been dancing,” she says, thinking back to all celebrations with her clan, the dances for spring, for harvest, for Fen’Harel. “Just not the kind that you’re thinking of.”

“When midterms are over, you should go with me. Let loose. Have fun.”

“I know how to have fun without looking like a total idiot in front of strangers.”

Zev gives her a smile that would melt the most snobbish of hearts. “When I dance with you, the only person you will think about in that room is me.”

Ellana laughs and shoves his shoulder. “Do lines like that actually work on people?”

“Would you like to find out?” He counters, his grin sharpening to something wicked.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I will take that as a yes.”

True to Zevran’s word, Saturday evening finds Ellana standing in front of the flickering sign of Club Rojarrio, a two-story building squeezed on the edge of downtown. Zevran has dressed for the occasion in dark jeans so tight they look like spray paint, and a white shirt unbuttoned past his collarbone.

Ellana wears her jeans with the least amount of frayed hems and one of Josephine’s t-shirts, the black one with gold flowers on it. When Josie set off for Antiva for Spring Break that morning, she allowed Ellana full access to whatever wardrobe was left.

“This is as sexy as I get,” she told Zevran flatly when he picked her up. He would never dare say anything to her, but the expression on his face alone told her exactly how pathetic he found her outfit.

“So long as you’re comfortable,” he had said, shrugging.

The bouncer at the door barely looks at their college ID’s. The second he sees Zevran he grins and waves them on inside.

“Come here often?” Ellana asks, eyebrow raised.

“I have a lot of frustrations to work out,” Zevran replies with a wink.

The inside of the club looks surprisingly swanky compared to its plain outside décor. The bar itself sits up in a second story balcony overlooking a live band and a dance floor packed with people. The music swells over them, fast paced with loud horns. Couples twirl and kick their feet up, and some are even swept up into the air like acrobats.

“I can’t dance like that!” Ellana protests.

“I’ll teach you. Simple steps, my friend. It only looks hard.”

He drags her to the back corner of the dance floor, under the balcony of the bar and far from the watchful eyes of its patrons. Taking her hands in his, Zevran demonstrates how to move her feet, from toe taps to feet kicking out to the side. Then he twirls her, in against his chest and back out onto
the dancefloor.

Ellana used to love dancing with her clan. There could be no embarrassment around the people who had known her since birth, only freedom to go where the music took her without a second thought. Her dancing then had no steps, no plans, just joy and movement without thought.

It’s hard to feel that same abandon right now, in the middle of a crowd of strangers, with music so far from the kind she grew up on.

“You are holding back,” Zevran says, not unkindly.

“It’s . . . I don’t know these people,” Ellana says, looking over her shoulder.

Even in the corner of the dance floor there are still people all around her.

Zevran takes hold of her chin and turns her face back to his. “Pay no attention to these people. They are here for fun. They aren’t looking at you.” He taps her nose with his finger. “You are thinking too much. Close your eyes. Listen.”

She rolls her eyes first, but complies. The music surprises her. All Dalish music is live, but humans seem to prefer theirs prerecorded. Instead, the music now feels both old and new, and it’s catchy. The rhythm of it starts to trickle into her bones, starts to itch under her skin. The urge to move, even if she will look like a drunk halla, starts to override her reluctance.

“Let’s try again,” she says.

Zevran’s eyes light up the moment she starts getting into it, kicking her feet out the way he taught her, holding onto his hands as she jumps and twirls around. It’s half planned steps and half random insanity, but Zevran doesn’t seem to care. They dance until Ellana can hardly breathe and begs for water.

A total of fifteen men and women make a point to greet Zevran on their way to the bar. Some with wide grins, some with pouty lips and a couple with evil side eye stares at Ellana.

“One bottle for my friend and me, please.” Zevran winks at the bartender. “Thank you, darling. It’s wonderful to see you.”

“How many of these people have you slept with,” Ellana asks as she leans up against the bar. “Just out of curiosity.”

“A gentleman never kisses and tells, my dear.”

“So, all of them?”

Zevran just grins.

They don’t get home until well after two in the morning. Ellana collapses into bed and sleeps until noon the next morning, something she hasn’t done since her first month in Orlais. But she goes out again two nights later. And when Josephine gets back from Antiva near the end of Spring Break, Ellana and Zevran drag her out too.

“Oh, I haven’t been dancing since – well, since two days ago,” Josephine admits. “But before that it had been forever.”
She rifles through her closet, tossing a couple of dresses on the bed before turning to Ellana. Her eyes flick up and down the jeans and t-shirt that Ellana wears.

“You’re not going out in that, are you?”

“...yes?”

“No.” Josephine’s voice is flat and final. “You are not.”

Neither of them leave the dorm until Josephine shoves Ellana into a flowy black dress and gives her some eyeliner.

“Dancing in a t-shirt, Maker forbid,” she mutters, smudging the corners with her thumb.

“It worked in the Dales,” Ellana offers helpfully, grinning when Josephine glowers at her.

“We are not in the Dales, thank you very much.”

Zevran waits for them by the bus stop, Sera and Krem arguing by the lamp post. Krem is wearing a crisp button down the color of the ocean that is most certainly not his.

“Blink twice if this is a hostage situation,” Ellana says to him.

Krem blinks slowly and dramatically until Sera elbows him in the gut.

“I’ve got his bank account information,” Sera says. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“I didn’t know you danced, Sera,” Josephine says brightly.

Sera makes a face. “I don’t dance that fancy stuff like Zev.”

“It involves a lot of jumping,” Zevran adds.

They all pile in Zevran’s car. Ellana leans in and whispers to Josephine, “Sera’s in jeans and a t-shirt.”

“We are not taking fashion cues from Sera,” she hisses back.

Club Rojarrio plays all kinds of music. Her first outing with Zev happened on Swing Night, but there’s also Rock Night and Antivan Night and even Oldies Night. And some nights, like tonight, they play a mix of everything. Sera dances much the same way the Dalish do, jumping and flailing her arms about and not giving a single shit.

Krem dances like a robot with a gun to his head. Zevran has been alternating between dancing flawless with Josephine, looking like something out of a movie, and slowly trying to coax Krem into letting loose.

Eventually Krem and Ellana catch their breath at the bar and gaze out over the crowd below them.

“Are you okay?”

Krem looks tears his gaze away from the dance floor. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Because those two look awfully cozy out there,” Ellana says, nodding at Zevran and Josephine.
“Zevran could dance cozily with a coat rack. It doesn’t bother me.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “Come on, Krem. Are we seriously going to dance around this forever?”

Krem looks shocked. “You think I’m into Zev?”

“Josephine, you idiot,” Ellana hisses, smacking his shoulder.

Krem closes his eyes. “Oh, sweet Maker, how the hell did you notice that?”

“Really? It’s only been happening in front of my face for the past two years.”

“Look, it’s just a stupid crush.” Krem rubs the back of his neck. “It’s not like I’m in love with her. She can do whatever she wants. I’m not bothered.”

“You’re really not jealous?”

“Of Zevran? Gods no. He flirts with me as much as he does with her. You should have seen the way he felt up my biceps when he checked the fit of this shirt. Trust me, I don’t do that pining/stare out the window bullshit you see in the movies.”

Ellana turns back to her water.

“If you say so.”

“You and Zev seem awfully comfortable with each other,” Josephine says nonchalantly, as they get ready for bed.

“Zev has no sense of personal space. He would get comfortable with a coat rack,” Ellana says, remembering Krem’s comment.

“So, you’re saying you’re not attracted to him?”

Ellana looks over at Josephine, trying to read her face. It’s impossible to tell from her cheery tone if her friend is jealous or just curious.

“Are you saying that you are?” she asks instead.

Josephine turns on her side and stares at Ellana. “Are you avoiding the question?”

“Are you?”

Josephine rolls her eyes. “If you’ve got a crush on Zevran, you have to tell me! That’s the law for best friends.”

“Oh? Would ignoring it be considered an act of war?”

“You do not want to go to war with me,” Josephine says, almost dismissively. “You would lose. Now. Talk.”

“I don’t have a crush on Zevran.”

“Liar!” Josephine gasps. “You dance with him all the time!”

“Dancing is fun.”
Josephine throws one of her pillows at Ellana. “You flirt with him all the time!”

“He flirts with everyone!” Ellana throws her arms up to block the next hit. “It’s harmless!”

“But you think he’s attractive!” Josephine hits her twice before Ellana snatches the pillow away and tosses it back.

“Have you looked at Zevran? The whole freaking world thinks he’s attractive.”

Josephine lets out a groan of frustration as she sinks down onto the bed. “I thought for sure you and Zevran were hooking up. Now I’ve lost ten sovereigns to Varric.”

Ellana picks up a stray pillow. “Varric makes bets on me?”

“Of course he does. He makes bets on everyone. You are not an exception.” Josephine sits up with her back against the headboard. “Do you like anyone?”

“Is this part of another bet?”

“No, just simple curiosity. You’ve been surrounded by attractive single people your age for nearly two years now. Is there no one that’s caught your interest? Unless . . .” Josephine hesitates for a second, “you just can’t feel that way about anyone?”

“That’s not it,” Ellana says. She chews on her lip, mentally rifling through the faces of her friends and classmates. “I grew up in a very small town surrounded by other very small towns. Everyone knew everyone and everyone dated each other because it’s not like there were a whole lot of other options. But when the only people you have to date are the people you’ve known your whole life, things get . . . messy. And it’s even messier when it’s one of your friends.”

The memory of Mihris, and her doomed crush on him all through middle school, flares up. She nearly winces at the accompanying embarrassment. It was supposed to stay her desperate secret, so of course the whole godforsaken school knew within days. And even though Mihris was never an asshole about it, it took a long time to get over the awkwardness of it all, especially when he started dating Dany. They had survived breakups and jealously and unrequited love, but many friend groups did not.

“You’ve never even thought about one of us?” Josephine asks.

“Oh, I’ve thought about it.”

It’s not like Ellana has never weighed the risk of it before, even recently. It’s crouched in the back of her mind at times, watching Krem tear down the practice field, sweaty and vicious, or the slender lines of Dorian’s fingers as he sketches out a math problem.

Definitely the smell of Zevran’s cologne, the tickle of his breath against her neck, the warmth of his steady hands when they dance, has inspired some interesting day dreams.

Hell, the days Josephine wears her hair down, Ellana sometimes can’t pull her gaze away from the gleam of it in the sun, clenching her fists so she doesn’t run her fingers through it.

“It’s just not worth it if it doesn’t work out,” Ellana says, almost as much to herself as to Josephine. “I need my friends. You guys are the only reason I’ve survived the last few years.”

She crawls in her own bed. “What about you? I don’t see you dating anyone. I do, however, notice your Antivan flirting with Zev and your sexy dancing.” Ellana gives her a pointed look.
“I’m far too busy to even consider dating,” Josephine says dismissively. “Besides, whatever match I make needs to strengthen my family and our business. Zevran is handsome and great fun, but . . . dalliances in college would just get in the way.”

“Is that why you’re trying to live vicariously through me?” Ellana teases.

“Yes.” Josephine glares down at her. “And you are making that impossible! Also, not very cost effective.”

“My apologies.”

A week later, Varric invites them all down to the Hanged Man for pool and Wicked Grace. He and Cassandra have had a running score between the two of them since that first time Cassandra wiped the floor with him.

Zevran arrives a little later than everyone else.

“Hey Zev!” Ellana slides off the side of the pool table. “Hold this,” she says to Josephine, handing over her beer.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m about to win my best friend ten sovereigns.”

Ellana walks up to Zevran, who immediately dips her in his arms and kisses her soundly.

“Hello, mi amor,” he says, voice deep and rough. Ellana has to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. He sounds like he walked off the set of an Antivan melodrama.

“What the hell was that!” Varric yells from the pool table.

In the background, Sera makes gagging noises while Cassandra gasps like she’s starring in the same soap opera as Zevran.

“My friends, I can hide my love for Ellana no longer!” Zevran declares, pulling Ellana back up to her feet with a flourish. “She is without parallel. I give up all other lovers.”

Dorian snorts loudly.

“I call bullshit,” Varric says, pointing his cue stick like a saber. “And it’s still your turn, Ellana.”

Zevran gasps as Ellana pulls away. “Master Tethras, I assure you that Ellana has captured my heart and soul forever. Do we not dance the night away every weekend, mi amor? Do I not climb through your window at night to kiss you to sleep?”

“I didn’t hear that,” Dorian says loudly. “And I can’t report what I don’t hear.”

“You can’t report something that’s obviously fake,” says Varric with an eye roll.

“Don’t listen to him, my love.” Zevran throws Varric a smirk. “Here, a kiss for good luck.”

He pecks her sweetly on the cheek before Ellana saunters back to the table.

A devoted actor, Zevran acts like a besotted idiot the entire night. He leans against her, draping his
around her shoulder with the grace of a lazy cat. He fetches her drinks and feeds her fried pickle chips as she shoots pool and declares to the whole bar how beautiful her eyes are in an improvised sonnet. He presses kisses against her hairline every time she sinks a ball.

When the night finally winds down, Zevran gathers her face in his hands, walks her against a wall, gives her a long and tender kiss that leaves her rather breathless.

“Goodnight, Ellana,” he says with a wink.

Ellana has to take a deep breath as he ducks out of the doorway.

“You’re blushing,” Dorian murmurs to her.

“Shut up, Dorian.”

She presses a hand to warm cheeks. Godsdamnit.

To her credit, Josephine waits until the two of them are safely stored away in their dorm room before pouncing.

“Oh my God, Ellana, what was that?”

“That was you winning your ten sovereigns,” Ellana told her, pulling out her pajamas. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Josephine stares at her. “That was planned?”

“Of course it was planned.”

“But it looked so real! I thought you’d lied to me!”

Ellana laughs. “No, just acting.”

“Acting,” Josephine snorts. “Right. Your reaction to that last kiss was not acting.”

“Shut up, Josie. It’s been a while, okay?”

“So, is Zevran really as good a kisser as everyone says?” Josephine takes a seat on the bed and looks up expectantly.

“Yes,” Ellana says immediately. “Holy shit, yes.”

“Good enough to make you rethink your ban on dating friends?” Josephine smirks.

“Almost. Creators, almost!”

The next day dawns breezy and balmy, so Ellana takes her homework outside underneath her favorite wide oak tree. Or she would, but Zevran has already made himself comfortable there. His fingers pick delicate melody from a sleek, golden guitar, because of course he knows how to play.

“Ah! *Mi amor*,” he says, smiling up at her.

“You’re in my spot,” Ellana says.
“This tree is fat enough for the both of us.” He scoots over and gives her room enough to sit down. “I thought you would come here. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Alright.” She slings her bag to the ground and then settles in next to him. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to apologize if I was too forward last night,” he says.

Ellana’s eyebrows raise. “Zev, we planned that. Why would I be upset?”

“I may have gotten a bit carried away. I am just making sure I did not cross any boundaries in the pursuit of a joke. I would never intentionally disrespect you.”

“Well, I’m not offended.” Ellana’s lips quirk up. “It’s not a hardship to test your reputation as the best kisser on campus.”

Zevran puts a hand on his chest. “You doubted me? Now I’m offended.”

Ellana laughs. “Well, I am happy to hear I did not upset you. If you wish, I will leave you to your studying.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Ellana says. “I can read through a hurricane. Your music won’t bother me.”

However, it’s not the music that distracts her, but thoughts of last night. Zevran played the part of a dutiful boyfriend flawlessly. Even though Ellana knew it was fake, the care underneath the grand gestures felt real. Zevran fit the appetites of a stereotypical man slut, but not the callousness that such behavior implied. He genuinely loved people – a lot of people, sure, but she got the sense that they weren’t all interchangeable bodies to him.

“So, I have a question for you,” Ellana says, setting her book down. “And you can tell me to mind my own business if you want to, but I’m curious.”

“Ask away, dear.”

“You’re gorgeous, intelligent, talented, kind, and genuine. There’s no way you’re single except by choice. So, what’s up with that?”

Zevran grins. “You’re making me blush, Ellana. This is the first time someone has complimented me so much without having sex first.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “Don’t avoid the question.”

“You’re not the first to ask, you know,” he says, setting his guitar down. “And it’s something I’m still trying to figure out. But I suppose you could say that I love people—all people. I love finding out their dreams, their secrets, their pleasures. There are so many wonderful beings out here that I find I do not want to settle for just one and miss the experience of the rest.”

“I can understand that,” Ellana says.

“What about you?” Zevran asks. “You also share all my wonderful qualities. Where is your lover?”

Creators, why is everybody obsessed with her love life? “Like I have time to even think about that when computer science is trying to kill me.”

“Well, consider me impressed that you have resisted the many attractive distractions around you for
so long. I would not have the strength.”

“No, you do not,” Ellana says, smiling.

Zevran plucks a daisy from the grass and tucks it behind her ear. “If you are ever in search for a
distraction, I am more than happy to offer my services.”

She gives him a fond eyeroll. “You sound like a prostitute.”

“Oh, my dear, I would have you free of charge.”

“I’m . . . weirdly flattered by that, thank you.”

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Kingbreaker is breaking me

Dear Fen’Harel,

I swear to the Creators themselves that if I have to hear one more thing about The Kingbreaker, I’m
going to punch someone. It’s bad enough that Krem made me read the whole freaking series last
year. I mean, the books are good. Definitely entertaining. And I’m used to Krem’s low-key obsession
with them and his quest to infect it upon all of his friends.

But then they started making a movie, and all chill went straight out the fucking window. Krem and
Cassandra and Varric and Josephine – even Dorian! – have talked non-fucking stop about what
scenes are going to be filmed, and which actors should have been cast instead, and blah blah blah.
It’s infected everyone I know.

A girl can only take so much.

The movie premieres next week and Varric has pre-bought tickets for all of us to go see the first
showing at midnight. Maybe a couple weeks afterward, everyone will finally shut up about it.

Your friend,

Ellana

The line for the midnight premiere of The Kingbreaker snakes outside the door. People arrive
dressed in costume, from hand stitched versions lifted straight from the movie trailers, to generic
fantasy dresses and tunics they’ve doctored up to fit in. Cassandra practically vibrates next to her,
head craned over the crowd of people gathering in the lobby, looking for Varric.

“He’s late,” she says darkly.

“Chill out, Cassie, he’ll be here,” Sera says, eyeing the candy kiosk and the swarm of children
around it.

“He has our tickets! If he makes us miss this movie, I will strangle him myself.”
“I’ll just sneak us in the back,” says Sera. “Maker, haven’t you ever snuck into a movie before?”

Cassandra looks scandalized at the very idea. She’s about to launch into Lecture Mode about integrity or dignity or whatever when Varric materializes in front of them, as if out of thin air.

“Where have you been?” Cassandra demands, turning on him the full force of her ire. “There will be no seats left for us to sit together!”

“Stay the execution, Princess,” says Varric. “I’ve got Tiny reserving the back row for us.”

He passes everyone their tickets and people give them dirty looks as they skip the line and head straight into the theater. Sure enough, Coach Bull sits up in the very back row, clutching an enormous bucket of popcorn. Even as the theater quickly fills up, all the seats in the back row are empty. Dorian makes a bee-line straight for the seat next to Bull and immediately helps himself to the popcorn bucket. Everyone else files in behind. Ellana ends up squished between Cassandra and Sera.

Hushed excited whispers fill the room as people wait impatiently for the movie to start. Sera pulls out a box of chocolate covered caramel.

“Did you pay for that?” Ellana whispers. She doesn’t remember anyone going near the ridiculous snack line.

Sera just rolls her eyes. Ellana shrugs and grabs a few pieces from the box.

She can tell by the muttered comments and gasps from Cassandra what they changed from the book, but with her complaints, Cassandra looks utterly enraptured. A bomb could go off in the next room and she wouldn’t move.

Sera, thank the Creators, is the only one besides Ellana who didn’t join the hype train. She only showed up to make snarky comments with Ellana (and the free candy, apparently). They both whisper and giggle throughout the movie, dodging the occasional glare from Cassandra whenever they get too loud.

“Gross, you can totally see his junk through those tights,” Ellana whispers.

“If that’s all he’s got, then he needs to start wearing looser hose,” Sera whispers back. “I’ve got a bigger dick than that.”

The steady stream of commentary keeps up until the climax of the movie, where the protagonist has stormed his way through a haunted Elvhen keep filled with the ghosts of brutally murdered Emerald Knights to find the Sword of Truth. Ellana eyerolls her way through the butchered translation of ancient Elvhen.

“He did not say that,” Ellana murmurs. “He said My mother is an Oak Tree. Creators, did these people not even do any research?”

Sera says nothing back. Not even a snort or a giggle. Ellana turns her head to find her friend gripping the armrest with whitened knuckles, her body pushed back against the seat as far as it would go. On the screen, an Elvhen ghost floats through a wall, screaming, and Sera flinches.

“What?” Ellana whispers.


She gives Ellana a half-hearted grin, but it feels robotic, just as her words sounded automatic. She
doesn’t relax until the hero runs out of the haunted keep as it collapses around him, Sword of Truth in hand.

Over Sera’s head, Krem shoots Ellana a speculative look.

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Never show me your weakness

Dear Fen’Harel,

I think Sera is afraid of ghosts. Or anything supernatural. There was a scene in The Kingbreaker where the protagonist had to break into some haunted tomb of an Emerald Knight (which I rolled my eyes at, because why are all the homicidal ghosts in movies elves?) and she was backed up in her seat so far it looked like she was trying to phase through it.

And then after the movie, when Krem launched into his fanboy rambling about that scene, Sera yelled at him to shut up and then made up some excuse to leave and ditched us.

So Krem and I spent the whole ride back to the dorms speculating and plotting. Of what, I can’t tell you yet. I don’t want to jinx. But I will say this:

A Kingbreaker never forgets. And neither do Krem and I.

Your friend,

Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@mail.com
Re: Never show me your weakness

Dear Ellana,

I wish you luck in your mysterious endeavors. Do keep me updated. I find myself strangely invested in this tale. I am eager to see some comeuppance.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

Though she has the diabolical mind of a comic book villain, Sera also has the attention span of a five-year old hopped up on Sour Gummy Nugs. The key to getting one over on her is simple: wait her out.
The two weeks before finals are always a landmine of end-of-semester projects and term papers. Every semester Ellana toys with the idea of launching a movement with college kids everywhere – finals suck bad enough without the added pressure of huge projects right before them. The last month of school generally makes free time the stuff of wishful thinking.

Krem, Ellana, and Josephine have – as usual – holed themselves away in the upper corner of the library, pounding out their last papers. Sera lays across a table beside them, flipping through her phone with impatient huffs and side-eyed looks their way.

“Andraste’s fucking ass, you three,” she whines, earning her several dirty looks from the students around her. “We were supposed to head to dinner half an hour ago. Can’t you nerds wrap it up?”

“Just let me finish this last paragraph,” Ellana murmurs.

“You three need a life,” Sera mutters. “Maybe I should do you all a favor and implant a virus on your laptops.”

“You wouldn’t survive the night,” Krem says, eyes not leaving his screen.

A few minutes later, the three of them hit save and start packing up, neither of them able to handle a second more of Sera’s whining before caving into the urge to strangle her.

“So, did you guys know this library used to be haunted?” Krem asks as they leave.

“What do you mean, used to be haunted?” Ellana asks. “Ghosts are kind of forever.”

Sera freezes, finger hovering over her phone, but Krem pays her no mind.

“Ghosts are for children,” Josephine scoffs. “Where did you even hear that?”

“It’s part of my research for my term paper. We have to pick a building in Skyhold and research the history of it. I picked the library because, duh, we practically live here. And it turns out, the building itself is over three hundred years old, and some massive fire happened a hundred and eight years ago and burned half of it down. Two students and a librarian never made it out, but the fire burned so hot that no one ever found their remains. Now they haunt the place at night.”


“It really happened. You can look it up,” says Krem.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ellana sees search results for the fire pop up on Sera’s phone.

“I wonder what the ghost of a burn victim looks like,” Ellana muses. “Would they be all melted and blistered?”

“Depends on how they died,” says Krem. “If it was from smoke inhalation, then they might look normal.”

“Oi! Shut up, both of you,” Sera snaps. “No one wants to hear about your stupid, silly ghost stories.”

Krem slaps her on the back. “That’s right, I forgot you’re afraid of ghosts.”

Sera bristles like a cat thrown in the shower. “I am not scared of stupid ghosts!”

“Are you sure? You seemed pretty freaked out at that ghost scene in Kingbreaker.”
“I was not freaked out, Krempuff. I was bored.”

Krem does an exaggerated impression of Sera cowering in her seat at the theater. Sera smacks the back of his head.

“Children!” Josephine warns.

“You might bluff well, but I know what I saw,” Krem says, unbearably smug. “I bet you fifty sovs you couldn’t last the whole night in the library.”

“You’re fucking on.”

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Revenge is best served with high pitched screaming

Dear Fen’Harel,

Did you know that the library is haunted? Krem and I did – years ago. It’s one of the things I learned when researching this place after I met Abelas that first time.

It’s not a widely discussed fact – probably because the last paranormal “incident” was over seventy years ago. Once the ghost was forgotten, all the ghostly happenings stopped . . . happening.

We didn’t tell Sera about that last part when Krem dared her to spend the entire night in the library.

It’s one of their Challenges. And yes, that’s Challenges with a capital C. It started when Krem and Sera first met at the Hanged Man and all the Challenges were small – drink bottles of hot sauce or ask the scary bartender for his number.

But they’ve kept it up all semester long. From saying the word “cock” in innocent conversation with strangers, to snorting the sugar off of Sour Gummy Nugs up the nose, to climbing the top of the bell tower, it’s a damn miracle no one has landed in jail or the hospital yet.

So when Krem Challenged Sera to spend the entire night in the library, it’s really not that insane compared to some of the previous Challenges.

Even though she would die before admitting it, Sera is terrified of anything paranormal or strange. So I offered to spend the night with her in the library.

It started out great. There are a hundred places to hide in that library, and the librarians don’t really clear the place out before they leave – it’s not like students are dying to spend the night here anyway and there are cameras. Well, except for the night Sera and I slept there because she deleted that footage and replaced it some kind of looped footage from last month.

Anyway, we packed movies and our laptops and Sera packed this giant flood light and we crashed on the sofas down by the lobby. Sera acted like it was this great sleepover, but I could tell she was nervous. She screamed when I sneezed too loud.

And then something banged, like a door slamming shut, somewhere in the stacks.

Sera shot up from the couch and pulled out a taser – an honest-to-Creators fucking taser.
“They think they’re so fucking clever, scaring me like that,” she told me, grinning like a lunatic. “But we’ll see who’s scared once I electrocute the piss out of them.”

But no matter how fast she ran through the library, she never found anyone. Meanwhile, books flew off the shelves with no one to push them, the lights flickered on and off, some eerie music played over the loud speaker, just soft enough to make you think that you imagined it and sometimes a barely audible “Sera” was whispered through the speakers.

We led Sera up the stairs to the top floor, where they supposedly found the bodies of the fire victims, when Sera’s flood light flickered off and smoke started seeping out of the door of one of the study cubbies, like there was a fire.

Something yanked on my ponytail, but the second they touched Sera she let out an unholy scream and flipped that taser on and what happened I’m still trying to piece together. All I know is that I heard a bunch of thumping and then the lights flickered on and Krem is holding Sera down on the ground and she’s flailing like a bobcat trying to stun him.

“You could have fucking warned me she had a taser!” Krem said to me.


Krem bent down and said so sweetly to her ear. “Remember that time you gave me my miraculous squirrel cure? Payback’s a bitch.”

She immediately glared at me. “And what’s your excuse?”

“Are you kidding me? I had to help him do all that stupid shit at three in the morning,” I said.

The whole set up might seem elaborate, but it was actually pretty easy. We corralled Zevran into our scheme with very little effort. Not only did he convince Wynne to let us in the library that night, but he also put some secret switch circuit in Sera’s flashlight and borrowed the fog machine from the Theater Department. Fishing wire, magnets, baking pans to bang around did all the rest.

Did this end the Great Prank Feud between Krem and Sera?

Hell no it did not. Right now I know Sera is planning fifty different ways to ruin Krem’s life. But at least I got some satisfaction out of it and Krem has some well deserved respect.

Yours,

Ellana.

The only thing that gets Josephine and Ellana through the last leg of finals is bribery. Of themselves. For each five paragraphs of a paper or ten pages of reading, they watch one episode of this Antivan melodrama that’s actually way more engrossing than Ellana anticipated.

It’s in the middle of the second episode of the night when Josephine’s cell phone rings. Ellana glances down – it’s the number for Josephine’s mother. Instead of ignoring the call or telling her mother to call later like Ellana expects, Josephine jumps up from the bed, pausing the movie with a tap of the space bar, and takes the call outside in the hallway.

Weird. Josephine hasn’t been shy about talking to her parents in front of Ellana for a long time. After a few minutes – Ellana hears faint squealing through the door – Josephine bursts back into the room.
“Guess what!” she cries, grinning so broadly her face can barely contain it.

Ellana gives her a wary look. “Is this about that boy band you like?”

“No! Trust me, if they were coming anywhere near Skyhold, I would probably jump out the window,” says Josephine. “This is almost as wonderful. Ellana, I asked my mother if you could join us this summer and she said yes!”

It takes a second for this to process. “Like, in Antiva? The whole summer? At your fancy beach house?”

Josephine nods excitedly. “Sipping Antivan Sunrises, reading those trashy novels Cassandra loves so much, tanning.”

The excitement unfolds slowly – and then all at once. Beaches. Ocean. Boardwalks. Sun and seagulls and no stress at all whatsoever. All the good food she could ever want, at no cost to her. Ellana leaps from the bed.

“You’re serious?” she asks, fighting a wide grin.

“It is going to be the best summer of your life,” Josephine says. “Don’t you worry about anything. My family will cover any expenses, you don’t even have to ask your benefactor. Unless –” a shadow crosses Josephine’s face. “Do you have to have his permission to go?”

“Are you kidding me? Do I look five to you? He pays my tuition; he’s not my parent. He doesn’t have any control over what I do in my free time.” A sobering through crosses Ellana’s mind. “What about your parents? Are they okay with me being . . . me?”

“Of course,” says Josephine. “I have literally told them everything I know about you. You’re like a celebrity to my little sister – who, by the way, might be the only detractor to this trip. She is never going to leave us alone.”

“You forget I grew up in a town where everyone was in your business all the time. I can handle it.”

They spend the rest of the evening going through photos of the house and boardwalk on Josephine’s phone, planning out shopping trips and adventures – horseback riding on the beach, parasailing in the lagoon. They look at the menus of Josephine’s favorite restaurants.

Krem is going to hate her so much this summer.

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Hot Damn!

Dear Fen’Harel,

Josephine invited me to stay with her this summer in Antiva! I’m really excited. I’ve seen pictures of her family’s beach house and it is so gorgeous. It’s like something out of a magazine or a movie. And I’ll actually be there, eating lobster at their table, drinking Mai-tai’s on their private beach, and petting dolphins on their private boat.

It sounds like I won the lottery or a game show or something.
And the best part is, Josephine’s family has offered to cover all the expenses. They’re rich beyond my wildest dreams, so even though a part of me feels a little uncomfortable about it, to them it’s the equivalent of the loose change in their couch.

And even though Josephine is disgustingly wealthy, she’s never an asshole about it, so I don’t have to worry about feeling inferior. She really just wants someone to hang out with other than her sister and her cousins and she’s even more excited about me being there than I am.

Don’t worry, Fen’Harel, I’ll make sure to send you pictures and keep you updated.

Your friend,

Ellana.

Finals loom large over the horizon, but all Ellana can think about is Antiva. It takes twice as long as usual to study, but she doesn’t mind. In three weeks she will embark on her first ever vacation, and all of this work and stress and studying will be a distant memory.

It doesn’t help that Josephine constantly talks about it. She even went so far as to have her mother ship all her bikinis to the dorm for the two of them to try on.

“I have this green and gold one that is going to look gorgeous on you,” she says as she cuts open the tape with one of her manicured nails.

“I’m not as . . . generously endowed as you up top,” Ellana protests.

“Then it will actually look modest on you. On me it looks obscene, I can’t wear it in public.”

When she pulls it out, it’s skimpier than anything Ellana has ever owned. Of course, back home she usually just jumped in the river in a t-shirt and cut off shorts after a long and sweaty hike, any bathing suit is skimpy to her. But still, Ellana eyes the halter top and tiny shorts with some trepidation.

Josie shoves it into her arms. “Try it on right now!”

It’s a testament to both her communal upbringing and how comfortable that she and Josie have become that Ellana strips off her shirt and bra without a bat of an eyelash. Josie’s right. The lush green and gold accents make her bronze skin glow and her eyes stand out.

“That is perfect,” Josie breathes. “It’s so perfect that I’m giving it to you.”

“What?” Ellana squawks.

“Of course, I am. You’ve ruined it for me now. I will always think of you and compare myself and come up short.”

Ellana bites her lip to keep from smiling. “It does not look that good.”

“Shut up, it does so. Besides, I have other bathing suits.”

“Thanks, Josie.”

“If you don’t break at least three people’s hearts in that suit this summer, I will be sorely disappointed.”
There is a knock on the door.

“Come in,” says Josie gaily.

Ellana turns around, expecting Zev or Krem and wanting to see their reactions. To her horror, Abelas stands in the door way, dressed in an impeccable three-piece suit and looking at her with raised eyebrows.

“Excuse me,” he says. “I’ll wait until you are . . . decent.”

Red to the tips of her ears, Ellana can only wordlessly nod as he closes the door again.

“Who is that?” Josephine hisses.

“That’s Fen’Harel’s lawyer,” Ellana says, swallowing.

She throws on her shirt and jeans over the suit and steps out into the hallway, where Abelas inspects one of the bulletin boards with morbid curiosity.

“Sorry about that,” she says. “I was, um, trying on some bathing suits, and I thought you were one of my friends.”

“A fruitless endeavor,” he says. “Where you are going this summer does not require such attire.”

Ellana quirks an eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure in Antiva it’s required.”

“But you are not going to Antiva.” He turns around and faces her.

A stone drops in the pit of her stomach.

“Excuse me?”

“You will be spending the summer on an archeological dig site in the Emerald Graves National Park. Fen’Harel has secured an internship for you.”

“Internship,” she says. “But I didn’t ask for one.”

“You did not need to.”

“But I already have plans.”

“Those plans are now canceled,” he tells her without any sympathy at all.

Fury leaves her wordless, her mouth gaping open. Can she argue about this? Does Fen’Harel have control over her summers in the contract she signed? Why would he arrange for this when she already told him what she had planned with Josephine?

Abelas takes an envelope from his suit pocket and hands it to her. “Your flight information and tickets. You will need to pack a wardrobe that can withstand dirt, wear, and tear. Fen’Harel has included a gift card in the envelope for you to buy such purchases if you need to.”

She takes it slowly from his hand, still struggling with a way to get out of this, but she’s afraid of unleashing her temper on Abelas, and *that* would probably end in her getting evicted from her scholarship and ejected out of Skyhold.

Abelas gives her a short bow. “My business here is done. I wish you a good day,” he says with the
sincerity of an automated telemarketer.

She says nothing back. Angry tears prick the edges of her eyes, blurring her vision as she stumbles back into the dorm.

“Ellana, what happened?” Josephine asks, her eyes big with worry. “You’re not in trouble, are you?”

Ellana sits down slowly on her bed. “I’m not going to Antiva,” she says. “Fen’Harel has arranged some sort of internship in Emerald Graves National Park. Some sort of archeological dig.”

Josephine’s face falls. “But . . . didn’t you tell him you were coming with me?”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

“Did he . . . not want you to go?” Josephine asks carefully.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say anything. I haven’t heard from him all week.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either.” Ellana bites her lip. “I don’t know if I can say no.”

Anger and bitter disappointment rage against each other. The urge to punch something overwhelms her. She sits up abruptly, throwing her hair in a rough ponytail.

“I’m going to the gym,” she says, voice jerky. “Call your parents . . . tell them I’m sorry for any expenses they’ve lost.”

“Ellana, you know they aren’t going to care about that,” Josephine says.

But Ellana has already walked out the door.

Through the window of the gym, Ellana can see Krem lifting weights while Coach Bull spots him. She doesn’t know whether or not to be relieved to have company.

Coach Bull takes one look at her expression and wordlessly fetches her gloves from the locker.

“What happened?” Krem asks, sitting up from the barbells. “Some asshole didn’t bother you, did he?”

Oh, hell yes he did, Ellana thinks. She’s too angry to explain anything and Coach Bull saves her from the attempt.

“Don’t ask questions. Just let the girl hit something.”

Ellana dons the gloves and starts jabbing punches at the bag.

How dare he?

How fucking dare he?

Who does he think he is that he could control her life without a care for her own wants or goals? Did he think that just because he’s rich, because he’s been generous to her, that he could dictate what she did in her free time? He didn’t ask. He didn’t even try to talk to her about it. He sent his lackey in to
She didn’t ask for his help! She doesn’t even know who he is. But he knows everything about her and the unfairness of that situation weighs on her suddenly. It makes her see their relationship in a new light. Ellana had thought they were friends. What a stupid, naïve thing to believe.

And godsdamnit, she had been looking forward to the beach! She works her ass off at this school. The last two semesters alone have nearly killed her. The last thing she wants this summer is to do more work! And in the Dales, on top of that, digging up Elvhen bullshit as if Fen’Harel doesn’t know she wants nothing to do with her culture anymore. It’s like he handpicked the way to make her the most miserable this summer.

It’s betrayal, pure and simple.

“Whoa! Easy, Ellana, you’re going to bruise your knuckles, you keep this up.” Bull grasps the wildly swinging bag and stills it. “Take a break.”

She sits down on a bench, panting, and Krem wordlessly hands her his water bottle.

“Thanks,” she gasps before she chugs the rest of it away.

By the time she and Krem both shower, Ellana has cooled off enough to talk about it. She rants to him as he escorts her back to the dorm, which Krem listens to with the patience of Mythal.

“You should talk to him,” he says. “Something might be up. This doesn’t sound like him.”

“You know, I want to believe that, but I don’t actually know anything about him to make that judgement,” Ellana says acidly.

“Well, then you should give him a major ass chewing. Don’t take things without a fight.”

Gods, wouldn’t she love to. But it’s too risky. She needs Fen’Harel for another two years, and now he’s capable of random, unannounced upheavals of her life. Last week she didn’t think he’d ever pull her tuition money out from under her, and now she’s not so sure.

Now she doesn’t know what he’s capable of.

Her flight leaves the day after Josephine’s. Josie insists Ellana keeps the bikini, even though she has no need of it now.

“Antiva isn’t going anywhere,” she tells Ellana, hugging her before she gets into the cab. “You’ll come one day. I promise.”

She kisses Ellana on the cheek and waves at her until the car drives out of sight. Ellana keeps up her cheery smile until she knows Josie can’t see her anymore. Then she sighs and returns to the dorm to pack her own bag.

Her laptop sits on her desk. Is there a point in taking it? She doesn’t want to so much as look at it for the next two months, not that there would be much point in taking it with her. Internet is spotty at best in the Dales and she highly doubts it exists at all in the Emerald Graves. She’ll be damned if she writes to Fen’Harel.
Torn between anger and curiosity, Ellana debated with herself all week to check her email for any word from him. Either he sends her a pity apology that would come too late (highly doubtful) or he would berate her for her ingratitude (if Abelas has informed him of her less than enthusiastic reaction to the news). Neither reaction would satisfy her, and on the eve of her flight, she would have no time to deal with it before diving straight into her internship.

But still . . . the curiosity burns at her. What reaction should she prepare for this summer? Against her better judgement, Ellana opens her laptop and logs into her email. Nerves fizz in her stomach as she scans her messages, looking for his name.

Nothing.

Ellana sits back in her chair.

She expected anger or contrition or oblivious confusion. Tips on what to pack. But nothing? Not even in her junk mail?

The more she stares at her inbox, the angrier she gets. He spends thousands of dollars on her, dictates to her how to spend her time, and yet he can’t be bothered to talk to her? Is she that insignificant to him? Does he not even care that she’s angry? Does he not even know?

Fingers shaking, Ellana composes a new message to him. She has to walk a tight line – going off on him as she dearly wants to puts her education at risk. But she can’t stomach the idea that he’s living in his own world, oblivious to what he’s done to her.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject:

Next time you want to ruin my vacation, have the guts to talk to me yourself – instead of hiding behind your lackey like a coward. Who, by the way, has all the tact and social skills of a CPU.

Once she’s done, Ellana packs the laptop in its case and makes arrangements to store it at Varric’s place with the rest of her things.

There’s a knock at her door.

“Ellana? I know you’re there. I can hear you seething,” says Krem.

Her lips quirk at the edges. “It’s unlocked.”

Krem walks through, spinning a Frisbee on his finger.

“We should get one more round in before you leave,” he says. “Get some of your aggression out.”

Gods bless Krem. “Let me finish packing first and you’re on.”

She takes a few minutes to double check her suitcase of sturdy jeans, shorts, hiking boots, bug spray, leather gloves, t-shirts, and flannel button downs. With Fen’Harel’s money, she bought a small space blanket and sleeping bag, though the list that Abelas emailed her did not specify those kinds of
things. But she knows what the Dales are like.

“You should pack the bikini,” Krem says lazily as she zips it shut.

Ellana shoots him a raised eyebrow. “Why?”

He shrugs, looking studiously at his phone, and the tops of his cheeks are ever so slightly pink. “They’ve got rivers in the Dales, right?”

“Uh huh.” Ellana smiles and stuffs the bathing suit in through the opening in the zipper.

“Five sovs says you can’t catch this one.”

“Five sovs says you’re wrong.”

Krem grins and cocks back the Frisbee. Ellana steps back as he whips it through the air like a missile. It shoots past her head and she races down the Quad after it, her thoughts narrowing to nothing but the bright yellow disk and the five sovereigns she’s going to get out of it.

So focused on the prize, she doesn’t notice Krem’s horrified face and frantic warnings, and certainly not the warm body her elbow collides into as she launches into the air like a deer to snatch the Frisbee from the air.

But now she notices landing hard on something definitely not hard, the pained groan in her ear, Krem’s distant yelling.

Ellana looks down at the elven man sprawled under her, the wide blue eyes, freckles sticking out like glitter on pale skin. And the blood starting to trickle from his nostrils.

“Oh, fucking Creators!” She leaps off of him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see you. I’m so sorry.”

The elf groans and sits up, hand cradling his nose. The sun gleams against his bald head.

“Shit,” Ellana hisses when he pulls his hand back and it’s covered in blood. “Here.” She yanks her shirt off, leaving her clad in her sports bra, and offers it to him to staunch the bleeding.

The elf’s eyes go wide and he tries to wave it off. “That’s not necessary,” he huffs, and he averts his gaze, the tops of his cheeks blushing.

Ellana rolls her eyes. “You’re bleeding and you’re worried about modesty?”

The elf closes his eyes. “Fair point,” he concedes taking the shirt and pressing it underneath his nose.

By now, Krem has rushed over, hand over his mouth, but his eyes sparkling. She knows by the time the elf leaves, he will have already texted Varric, and everyone will give her shit.

“That was a hell of a tackle. You should play for the Chargers, Ellana.”

“Fuck off, Krem. At least I caught it. You owe me five sovs.”

The elf jerks his head up at the sound of her name. He stares so intently up at her that Ellana wonders if they know each other. She doesn’t remember meeting any bald elves, and he looks older than a typical student, but maybe they had class together.
“You maimed me . . . for five sovereigns?”

Or maybe he’s memorizing her face so he can press charges later.

Ellana winces. “I am really sorry about that.”

She gets to her feet and offers her hand. The elf hesitates for moment before taking her hand and pulling himself up. His height surprises her -- he has at least two inches on Ellana’s five-foot ten frame. Most elves are lucky to reach 5’8.

The elf stands for a moment, shirt pressed against his nose, looking rather stunned.

“Are you okay?” Ellana asks, which is a stupid question. Obviously he’s not.

“Pardon me,” he murmurs, “but I think I need to go to the emergency room.”

He walks away before Ellana can do something stupid, like open her mouth and offer to accompany him, even though he’s a complete stranger and probably never wants to see her face again and will probably slap an assault charge on her.

Still, she watches him lope across the Quad towards the campus parking lot to make sure he doesn’t suddenly collapse.

“If we keep playing, are you going to grievously injure anyone else?” Krem asks.

She elbows him in the gut. “Yeah. You.”

Ellana hates flying. The whole process is nerve-wracking – getting there on time, getting through security, trying not to miss the connecting flight. Gods, she wishes she had a car to drive to the Emerald Graves, even if it would take her two days.

Driven by stress and paranoia, she arrives early and is one of the first passengers on the plane. The rest file in, and Ellana stands up to let an elderly dwarf into the window seat next to her. The plane is just about to take off when one of the flight attendants tells the pilot to hold for a late passenger.

By now Ellana’s been sitting in her seat for the better part of forty-five minutes and her patience is wearing thin. She looks up when the passenger finally arrives, just so she can put a face to the source of her annoyance.

It’s the elf from the Quad, sporting a large white splint over the nose. Purple bruises seep from underneath it, spreading under his eyes like ink from a broken pen.

Ellana scoots down in her seat and averts her gaze. Gods, that look like it hurt and judging from the thunderous expression on his face, he would love nothing more than to call the cops on her.

As he heads down the aisle, clutching a leather laptop bag and a book, Ellana closes her eyes and prays to the Creators that he doesn’t sit anywhere near her. And those merciful Creators, they listen. The elf stops a few rows ahead of her and crams himself into an aisle seat on the opposite side.

Ellana has brought only one book with her – an advance copy of Varric’s latest installment of *Hard in Hightown*. An early birthday present, he called it, as if he isn’t waiting anxiously for her opinion on it once she’s done. But the elf’s presence just five rows ahead of her destroys her concentration. She can see part of his profile from her seat and she can’t help but study him.
He’s dressed in a suit vest, button down, and dark dress pants—pretty dapper for flying. His long legs look rather cramped, folded up in a way that reminds her of a spider. Ellana knows that discomfort—the magazine holder in the seat in front of her currently digs into her own legs.

Despite looking the exact type of person to get lost in a library, the elf does not pull out any books. Instead, he leans back in the chair as much as the space will afford him and closes his eyes.

*You are not watching him sleep, that is creepy.* Ellana chastises herself.

Even so, every now and then she sneaks glances at him. The elf sleeps like the dead, arms crossed and unmoving the entire three-hour flight. Creators, what if he *is* dead? What if she gave him a concussion yesterday and he’s never going to wake up?

But the elf startles awake at the jolt of the plane landing, blinking blearily around for a moment. Ellana ducks her gaze back down to her book. She needs to be able to get off this plane without him noticing her.

She keeps her distance as everyone stands up and rifles through the overhead compartments, allowing people to go ahead of her in a show of false generosity. Like some kind of stalker, Ellana trails after him to the baggage claim, keeping plenty of people in between them.

Her eyes scan the crowd, looking for a sign with her name. She needs to locate her ride, grab her baggage, and get the hell out before her assault victim ever notices her.

A young man in a very large gardening hat holds two posters up, one in each hand. The left hand sign has her name scribbled on it in black marker. She lets go a sigh of relief before looking at the other sign.

Her heart stops.

Scribbled onto the second sign is the name *Solas Felassan.*

As in Dr. Solas Felassan.

As in the man who wrote *The Rise and Fall of Arlathan.*

And as if her heart wasn’t going into enough palpitations, the elf from the plane strolls over to the boy, shaking his head and smiling as if they are old friends.

“The sign is unnecessary, Cole,” he says, “I know what you look like.”

“I have a new hat. I wasn’t sure,” Cole says. He nods to Ellana. “Is that her?”

Dr. Solas Felassan turns his head to look at what is undoubtedly an unflattering picture of Ellana with her mouth hanging open.

“Are you Ellana Lavellan?”

Well *shit.*
My first cliffhanger. Feels exhilarating! If anyone wants to talk shop or fic with me, come to my tumblr: blarfkey.tumblr.com. I've never had anyone do that before, and I would welcome the chance. Thanks for you all your wonderful comments and Kudos!

Also, I wrote a canon compliant fic for the wonderful friendship that Solas and Cassandra share if anyone wants to give that some love. I am mildly obsessed with their relationship in the game, haha.
Strap in boys and girls: The journey of Solas and Ellana’s True Love is a hell of a bumpy ride. This is only the beginning.

This is not happening.
The thought keeps running through her mind on a loop.

This is not happening. This is a dream. A nightmare. Some kind of misunderstanding.

Dr. Felassan keeps looking at her expectantly, eyebrows slightly raised as if he’s starting to worry that she has a mental dysfunction.


Cole tilts his head up, but not enough for her to see his eyes under that ginormous hat. “Hello,” he says, and he sounds like a five-year-old meeting his teacher for the first time – shy but hopeful. “I’m Cole.”

He doesn’t make a move to shake her hand, but she can’t tell if he’s oblivious or rude.

“No. I think I got it. Thank you,” she adds.

“Okay.” He turns to Dr. Felassan. “I parked the car out that way . . . I think.”

“We’ll find it.”

Cole leads them on a merry goose chase through the parking garage until Dr. Felassan hits the car alarm. Ellana throws her suitcase in the trunk of a compact silver sedan, the interior of which is spotless save for one of those travel pillows and a blanket stashed in the front seat.

Dr. Felassan ducks into the driver’s side, so Ellana practically dives into the back before Cole can offer the front seat out of politeness.

“Cole, please take off your hat,” Felassan murmurs as he pushes the seat back to accommodate his long legs and adjusts the mirror. “It’s hard for me to see.”

Cole obliges, tucking it by his feet. His shaggy blonde hair roughly resembles a haystack, and his bangs hang in his eyes like a sheepdog.

“This is Solas,” he says, gesturing to the driver.

“We’ve met,” Dr. Felassan says shortly. He puts the car in drive, and they make their way out of the parking lot and onto the highway.
Cole looks at Dr. Felassan with his head cocked to the side. “You’re hurting.”

“I’m fine, Cole.”

“Your knuckles are white on the steering wheel,” Cole points out. “I can drive. I won’t get lost. I have the GPS.”

Dr. Felassan spares a small smile at Cole, but it looks strained. “Thank you for the offer, but I can handle it. You should get some sleep. You look tired.”

“If you say so,” says Cole. He pulls on the neck pillow and blanket and drops into a nap with the speed and efficiency of the elderly.

A silence descends upon the car thick enough to suffocate. It makes Ellana want to roll down the window just to get some air. Instead she settles with her head against the glass, trying to ignore the stabbing pang of guilt at the sight of his broken nose in the review mirror.

She meets her favorite author and the first thing she does is permanently disfigure him.

This must have been Fen’Harel’s plan -- the meeting, not the nose-breaking. Arranging an entire summer working with her favorite author on a dig site. He probably thought she’d be ecstatic.

Under different circumstances, she would have been. But he didn’t talk to her – he didn’t ask her—and she’s gone and broken Dr. Felassan’s nose and he seems like he hates her for it and this whole fucking summer is already a mess and it’s all his fault.

The silence lingers the entire two-hour drive. No music. No conversation. Only the faint snores of Cole, who sleeps the entire time, puncture the quiet. Dr. Felassan doesn’t seem too keen on small talk, and Ellana is too mortified to start.

Instead she stares out the window as the trees thicken and the towns become sparse, stewing in her own helpless anger. She has no idea where they’re staying beyond some vague description of some cabin retreat within the park itself. She has no clue what she’s expected to do for these people – just a promise that someone will fill her in once she arrives.

(She’s still waiting.)

Gods, if Dr. Felassan doesn’t hate her enough now, wait until he finds out how underqualified she is for this internship. She’s going to look like some clueless brat whose successes stem only from the favoritism of the type of man who throws his weight around and calls in favors. How many other students – real history or archeology students – applied for this spot and were disappointed by someone who doesn’t even want to be here?

They pull up to the furthest flung cabin the park probably has to offer just as the sun begins to set.

“Cole,” Dr. Felassan says, shaking the boy softly on the shoulder. “Cole, wake up. We’re here.”

Cole sits up, blinking like a fawn, and nods. “Do you need help with your bags?” he asks Ellana again, twisting around in his seat.

“No, thank you,” she says, oddly touched by his insistence. “I got it.”

She takes a shaky step out of the car. The cacophony of birdsong and the thick, heady smell of
green, of dirt and leaves and flowers, jolts her awake faster than a double shot of espresso. The cabin sits in front of a gravel driveway at the end of a dirt trail. A wide creek glitters off to the right. Two massive trees guard the front porch.

It’s all the best parts of home, and the sudden ache from it feels like a punch in the kidney. She breathes in deep, relishing the scent of clover.

She stretches from four hours of sitting. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Dr. Felassan do the same, his long arms stretching above his head.

The screen door of the cabin opens and a dark-haired elven woman steps out.

A Dalish elven woman.

She and Ellana lock eyes and there is a moment of shock and joy and recognition all rolled together.

“Lethallan!” she cries, bounding down the steps. “Oh, Solas, you didn’t tell me that she was Dalish!”

“A surprise to me as well,” Dr. Felassan says, his eyes darting to her.

Before she can decipher what exactly that look means, the elf takes Ellana’s hands in her own and squeezes.

“I’m Merrill Sabrae!” she says, her eyes bright as the sunlight streaming through the trees.

“Ellana Lavellan.” She cannot help but grin back. Merrill’s eyes are as wide and guileless as a baby halla.

“What part of the Dales are you from? How long have you been away? Do you ever go up north? That’s where I’m from, just outside of Kirkwall –”

“Merrill, Ms. Lavellan just arrived. Give her a moment to breathe, will you?” Dr. Felassan says, hefting his laptop bag over his shoulder.

Merrill goes a bit pink in her cheeks. “Right, sorry. I tend to ramble, Ellana, and sound like an idiot. You’ll have to excuse me.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Ellana says, shooting Dr. Felassan a look, but he has already turned away and headed towards the cabin.

She answers Merrill’s questions as they head inside. The middle of the cabin is taken up by the kitchen and living room, while doors to the bedrooms and bathroom flank the sides. A tall man stands in the kitchen, pulling plates out of the cabinets.

“Oi, you’re just in time,” he says with a light brogue. “Pizza’s just about done.” He looks up at Dr. Felassan, who deposits the laptop bag onto the small table between the couch and the kitchen island. “Sweet Maker, Solas, what clocked you in the face?”

Ellana stiffens and tries not to look guilty.


The man waves him off. “The ruin’s not going anywhere. Is this the intern we were promised?” he gestures at Ellana.
“Ellana Lavellan,” Dr. Felassan introduces, “this is Dr. Bram Kenric, my partner for this site.”

“It’s a pleasure, Ellana,” says Dr. Kenric. He comes around the kitchen to shake her hand. “Maker knows we can use all the help we can get. The ruin’s half buried under this forest, and it’s been hell trying to get it all uncovered.”

“What kind of ruin?” Ellana asks, intrigued despite herself.

Merrill’s eyes get even wider, if that was possible. “You don’t know?”

Ellana’s eyes shoot Dr. Felassan a rather ungrateful look. “I was told I would get more information about it once I arrived.”

“Well then,” says Dr. Kenric with a grin. “Put your things away and we’ll be more than happy to talk your ear off about, eh, Solas?”

“Forgive me, but I think I need to lie down,” says Dr. Felassan. “I’m not feeling well.”

Book in hand, Dr. Felassan walks over to one of the side doors and ducks into his bedroom.

Ellana doesn’t see him for the rest of the night.

It’s hard not to take his abrupt absence and complete lack of acknowledgement personally. Ellana finds herself staring at the door to his bedroom until Merrill nudges her arm.

“You can put your things in my room,” she says. “I have a bunk bed!”

Ellana pulls her suitcase into the room and looks around. Bunk beds on one side, a dresser and a nightstand on the other. There are few personal effects, but lots of flowers in vases, or sitting on the window sill, or hanging from a string across the bottom of the top bunk. It makes her smile.

“I usually take the bottom bunk, but you can have whichever one you’d like,” says Merrill, flitting beside her like an anxious butterfly. “The bottom drawers on the dresser are yours.”

“The top one’s fine with me.” Ellana parks her suitcase beside the dresser before heading back out into the kitchen.

Dinner is a quiet but pleasant affair. Bram (as he insists to be called) and Merrill fill her in on the details of the ruins they’re uncovering with the fervor of fanatics. It’s part of an old fort, probably belonging to the Emerald Knights, though they haven’t uncovered any pieces of armor or weaponry to confirm that fact.

“It’s definitely Dalish,” Merrill assures her, as if Ellana would walk out if it wasn’t.

“If only I could get my hands on a buckle,” moans Bram. “I could tell you exactly how old the ruins are, right down to the decade. Alas, the forest has downright devoured it. The steps alone are under half a foot of dirt. It’ll be weeks yet before we can uncover any personal effects.”

“It didn’t want to be found,” says Cole. “They’ve hurt the others.”

Like Coach Bull in a steakhouse, the history nerd inside Ellana perks up at the description of the ruins. No matter how much she didn’t want or ask to be here, she can’t help it. It’s been nearly a year since she read a history book that wasn’t for class, and godsdamn it, Ellana misses it.

After dinner, Ellana unpacks her suitcase and sets out her clothes for tomorrow. Merrill advises for an early bedtime, as everyone gets up around six in the morning to get ready. Hopped up on a
cocktail of jetlag mixed with curiosity and a touch of anxiety, Ellana evades sleep for what feels like hours. Only the sound of Merrill’s gentle snoring – which strongly resembles Josephine’s – lulls Ellana to sleep.

Despite the unsettling name, the Emerald Graves is beautiful. She had only come here once before, as a toddler with her parents, too long ago to even remember. Trees tower like sentinels, as far as the eye can see, so thick on the ground that they tint the sunlight green. Boulders large as houses stick out from the ground, with sharp cliffs that hover over them. There is not a single sign of modern civilization anywhere past the cabins, not a beer can or gum wrapper in sight.

The ruins lie only an hour’s hike away from the cabin, but it feels like an eternity to Ellana, whose sleep deprivation sits in her limbs like injected lead. Only the coffee Bram made that morning keeps her going. That, and Dr. Felassan, who also looks like he had a rough night and yet sets the pace for everyone else, his long legs loping effortlessly over rocks and tree roots and hills, even with the extra burden of the cooler packed with their lunches.

He asked her once, when she tripped over a tree root, if she needed him to slow down and that was all it took ensure that she would never lag again.

Luckily, Merrill provides excellent distraction.

“You’re a student at Skyhold, yes?” she asks Ellana. “Do you know a professor named Varric Tethras?”

“Oh my gods.” Ellana nearly trips over a vine. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Merrill looks at her a bit uncertainly. “. . . No?”

“Sorry, I just – I can’t believe I’m in the middle of the Dalish wilderness a thousand miles away and I still run into someone Varric knows. How is that even possible?”

A small snort – laughter? Mockery? – comes from Dr. Felassan, the only sign of life they’ve gotten out of him since he stumbled from his bedroom that morning. (He’s notoriously not a morning person, apparently.)

“Varric was my professor in Kirkwall,” says Merrill, “before he transferred.”

It hits her then. “It’s you! You’re the Dalish friend he talks about!”

Merrill beams. “He talks about me?”

“Oh, good. I worry that he forgets about me. I try to write as often as I can, but I’m always in places like this, far away from cities. I don’t have much opportunity to see him or the others.”

“The others?”

Merrill spends the rest of the hike regaling Ellana with tales of her time at Kirkwall State University and her friends there. It reminds Ellana of her own time at Skyhold – getting into ridiculous situations with a group of people who shouldn’t fit together but do. It almost hurts to listen to the wistfulness in
Merrill’s voice. This will be Ellana someday – she’s still in the middle of it now, but in a couple of years she’ll graduate and everyone will go their own way and all she’ll have left will be stories.

And she’s here, stuck in the Dales, rather than making memories with Josephine. Resentment spikes in her, but she tries to swallow it down.

The sight of the ruins near instantly banishes her negativity. At first glance, they’re underwhelming – tall lumpy shapes covered in vines and leaves and dirt. They stand in a broken circle, the main entrance a dug-out tunnel that traveled lazily upward. Inside, piles of shovels and trowels and brushes and tools Ellana had never seen before sit under large swathes of canvas stretched out over poles, providing shade and shelter from possible rain. The floor – or ground since only patches of stone had been uncovered – is sectioned into a grid with stakes and pink ribbon. Piles of dirt and vines and roots sit along the far wall.

In short, it’s a mess.

“Are you sure there’s something underneath all of this?” Ellana asks, standing in the middle of the circle and looking up at the green covered walls. It looks so broken, almost beyond saving.

Bram laughs. “They don’t show these pictures in Thedas Geographic, do they? Archeology is mostly hard, manual labor. They don’t really show this part in the movies.”

“It sleeps here, stubborn, stuttering, unable to reach out. Waiting,” says Cole, sighing.

He almost sounds like he’s quoting something, a fragment of poetry from a lost epic. No one comments on it, though, so Cole must quote fairly often. Ellana had a guy in Varric’s composition class that spoke almost entirely in dialogue from some cult classic TV show she’d never heard of. Maybe Cole’s one of those people.

They put Ellana to work helping uncover the walls. They stand at least two stories tall in places, two stacked rings of arches from what Ellana can see of the tiny portion that’s already been uncovered. A carpet of ivy covers every other inch, so thick that sunlight doesn’t trickle through the spaces between the arches. Small towers stretch up like fingers on the very top corners with only a hint of stone peeking from underneath the vines.

Bram hands her a machete, the leather sheath for it that hooks onto her waist, and a pair of hedge clippers. “Do you know how to use these?” he asks.

Ellana raises her eyebrow at him. “I’m Dalish. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think,” he says good-naturedly. “You’re the second ever Dalish elf I’ve met.”

She smiles. “I could build a house out of sticks and nails. I think I can handle a pair of hedge trimmers.”

Bram shows her where to pile her debris and to alert him or Dr. Felassan or Merrill to anything she finds that’s not organic. Then he settles down beside one of the portioned off squares and gently removes each layer of dirt. Merrill and Cole work their own square together beside his, while Dr. Felassan sets up his tools and notes at one of the canvas-covered worktables.

Ellana has done landscaping work before – trimming rose bushes and hedges, clearing overgrowth from old fences, digging trenches and steps and tilling fields.

None of that compares to this. None of that could even prepare her for this. These vines, grown unhindered for hundreds of years, are as thick as her arm and they’ve anchored themselves into the
layers of dirt underneath with stubborn ferocity. Not to mention that hundreds of smaller vines have intertwined together to form clumps of greenery thick as carpet. It takes Ellana ten minutes of hacking to get rid of one such clump.

It’s gardening the same way parkour is just a leisurely stroll.

Twenty feet away, Ellana’s favorite author dons a beat-up baseball cap and massages sunscreen into the tips of his ears. Twenty feet away, Ellana’s favorite author scans a worn notebook with the same fingers that typed *The Rise and Fall of Arlathan*.

Twenty feet away stands the most prolific Elvhen archeologist, living and breathing and *existing* in Ellana’s peripheral vision, and she is trying to contain herself.

It helps to see him perform ordinary tasks, like sharpen a pencil or wipe sweat away from his brow and adjust his hat. It helps to see someone as polished as he looked on the plane wearing a beat-up hat to begin with, along with mud-caked hiking boots and jeans with patches on the knees.

And, she hates to admit it, it helps to see his hideous broken nose. It makes him look mortal.

Even still, *that* man standing twenty feet away is the person Ellana has been dying to meet since she set foot in Skyhold and he hasn’t said more than three words to her this morning (a murmured “please excuse me” as he inspected the stonework by her feet.)

Is he naturally this quiet or does he genuinely hate her?

Ellana throws herself into the daunting task ahead, letting it distract her. Either he is just quiet and she’s going to look like an obsessive fangirl or he does hate her and it’s going to drive her crazy trying to figure out a way to fix it and look even worse than an obsessive fangirl.

Hours slip by, Bram and Merrill’s earnest small talk a babbling stream of background noise, until the sun hangs directly overhead, beaming through the canopy like little lasers. Sweat drips down Ellana’s back and she realizes too late that perhaps she should have packed her own hat or sunglasses.

A bottle of water appears in her vision, startling her enough to nearly make her drop her machete. Cole is attached to it, his eyes downcast under his wide-brimmed gardening hat.

“T’m sorry.” he says, his voice soft like a bird. “I didn’t mean to startle you. But it’s time for lunch.”

Ellana takes it gratefully and joins the rest of them in the shade of one of the canvas canopies. The lid to the cooler sits propped against the table, and Merrill hands Ellana a turkey sandwich.

“How has your morning gone so far?” she asks Ellana.

“Oh, great,” says Ellana. “After four hours I think I’ve uncovered a whole square inch of dirt.”

Bram laughs. “Archeology is slow work. You’re doing fine.”

“You’re pushing yourself too hard,” says Dr. Felassan. He doesn’t look up at her from the notebook he’s sketching in. “You need to pace yourself.”

A prickle of frustration rises in her throat. How could he notice how hard she works when he can’t even look at her?
“Your enthusiasm is unparalleled,” says Bram, as if trying to soften the blow. “I wish Collette was still here. She’s a bit like that. Between the two of you, that wall would be uncovered in a week.”

“Who’s Colette?” Ellana asks.

“My research assistant,” says Bram. He pulls out his phone and shows Ellana pictures of a rather surly looking elven woman on top of an Avvar statue. “This was on our first dig together. She said that statue was the ugliest thing she had ever seen and it haunted her nightmares.”

“I don’t blame her,” says Ellana. “It looks like a person melting.”

Bram flips through several more pictures of him and Colette on various dig sites throughout the years like a proud grandfather showing off his grandkids, even though Colette looks barely younger than him.

“She was here at the beginning, but she fell exploring the top of the wall and broke her leg,” he adds mournfully.

“Is she coming back?” Ellana asks.

“Oh, undoubtedly, but probably not for the whole summer.”

“Bram is a little lost without her,” adds Merrill, smiling.

“She remembers everything,” says Bram. “I’m lucky if I don’t forget my hat every morning.”

“Hats are very important,” pipes up Cole.

Lunch lasts roughly an hour. It was nice to take a break in the shade of the canopy. Even though the tree canopy is too thick to allow much sunlight through, the temperature and humidity level have steadily risen since the morning. Merrill asks more questions about how Varric is settling at Skyhold – he transferred only two years ago from Kirkwall, apparently.

“I almost went to Skyhold,” Bram says. “Instead, I went to the University of Orlais.”

Ellana grimaces. “Oh no, Bram. You’re a Cowardly Lion? And here I thought you were turning out to be okay.”

Bram grins good-naturedly. Every expression he makes has a hint of good-naturedness to it. “We’re the Lordly Lions, thank you very much. And at least my school mascot isn’t a goat.”

“That goat is a ram and it has a very colorful and unique history. And we actually win our sporting matches.”

“Oho!” Bram’s eyes light up. “You want to talk about winning sporting matches? Let me tell you –”

A jaunty whistle cuts through their banter. Bram perks up like a dog at the sight of a treat and stands up. Through the dug-out entrance a young dwarven woman appears, dressed in the dark green of a park ranger and swinging a basket under her arms.

“Good afternoon, Lady Harding!” says Bram, waving. His grin threatens to stretch beyond the confines of his face.

“I come bearing gifts,” she says, walking under the canopy – she does not have to duck – and propping the basket up on the table.
Up close, Ellana can see hair orange as a tabby cat peeking underneath her hat and a face full of freckles. The Lady Harding flips open the lid of the basket to reveal a nest of brown, hard boiled eggs cushioned in napkins.

Even Dr. Felassan perks up at the sight of them.

“Are these from your farm?” he asks.

“Yes. Freshly laid this morning and boiled. I brought extra since the last batch lasted you lot about five seconds.”

“They were rather eggcelent,” says Bram.

Ellana rolls her eyes, but Harding giggle-snorts.

“This is Lady Harding and she saves people from cliffs,” says Bram, introducing the dwarf with a little bow.

“It’s Ranger Harding, and I wouldn’t need to save people from cliffs if they would pay attention to their surroundings when they walked.”

“It’s difficult to take notes and look where you’re going at the same time,” says Bram, a smile tugging up the corners of his lips.

An identical smile graces Harding’s lips. “That’s why you stay in one spot, like Dr. Felassan. I don’t have to worry about him because he’s not an idiot.”

“I like to live dangerously.”

Harding snorts at that. “You’re as dangerous as a cupcake.” She turns to Ellana. “I heard you guys were getting a new recruit to replace Collette,” she says. “I’m Lace Harding.”

She shakes Ellana’s hand. It’s small but mighty, clenching Ellana’s fingers firm enough to know that Harding could probably whoop her ass if she wanted, even if Ellana stood a foot taller. “Ellana Lavellan.”

“How’s your first day going?” Harding asks.

“It’s . . . going.” Ellana glances over at the wall. The only indication of her back breaking labor is the pile of vines on the ground – the wall looks as if she hadn’t touched it.

“Yes, that ivy is a giant pain in the ass,” says Harding. “There’s my handiwork.” She points to one of bald patches on the other side of the ruins. “That took me all day.”

“You work here?”

“I volunteer, sometimes. When I get a day off. Some of the other rangers have come in too.”

“She is being modest,” speaks up Dr. Felassan. “Ranger Harding discovered and reported this place.”

“That’s right,” says Bram. “She’s like the explorers of old! None of this would exist without her.”

A shy smile blooms on Harding’s face. “That’s not – I just like to wander, really. You guys are doing all the real work.”
Thus starts a compliment war between Bram and Harding. Ellana shoots a speculative look over to Merrill, who looks back at Ellana, wide eyed and oblivious.

Gods, she wishes Josephine were here. Or Varric. Someone needs to start a betting pool.

“Anyway,” says Harding, turning away from Bram, her cheeks tinted rose, “I’ve got to start heading back. There’s a campsite full of drunk high school kids I need to check on. I swear if I find even one beer can, I’ll get one of the bears to pee on their car.”

“Don’t forget to check the plants,” says Bram. He turns to Ellana. “Lady Harding is very picky about which plants you pull up.”

Harding throws him a glare that has no heat in it. “I am when it’s Royal Elfroot. It’s endangered.”

“How can you tell the difference between that and regular Elfroot?”

“Royal Elfroot has a bluish tint to it,” says Ellana. “And it grows taller and thicker.”

“Exactly,” says Harding. “I figured I wouldn’t need to brief you on the local flora and fauna.”

“I grew up about three hours from here,” says Ellana. “There’s nothing here I haven’t seen before.”

“Well, thank the Maker for that. Maybe you can educate this one about rashvine.” Harding jabs a thumb at Bram. “I can’t always be around to save him.”

“Oh, trust me, rashvine and I are old friends,” says Ellana as Bram shudders.

Harding says goodbye with a jaunty wave, her whistling echoing in the trees long after she disappeared. They split the eggs, which were still somewhat warm and utterly delicious, and then head back to work. Ellana returns to her spot at the wall. Dr. Felassan’s words float in her head – you need to pace yourself – and she finds herself irrationally disagreeing.

Does he think she’s some kind of wuss? An academic with just the strength to pick up her books? She had worked entire days doing back-breaking farm work. She can handle a few more hours of trimming vines, for Creators’ sake!

She resumes her task with a vicious intensity and doesn’t let up for the next four hours.

They stop around five. Ellana has roughly three square feet of vines clipped and a mound of plant life as tall as her waist. Exhaustion makes the trek back to the cabin much quieter than the morning. Ellana and Merrill carry the empty cooler listlessly between them. Ellana’s body feels like a phone battery on one percent, a forcible shutdown on the horizon. Indeed, she barely lasts through a dinner of salad and cold cuts before collapsing on her top bunk.

In seconds she sleeps like the dead.

Merrill’s alarm doesn’t even faze Ellana. Merrill herself has to rock Ellana’s shoulder to get her to wake up.

“On Dhea, sleepy-head!” Merrill says brightly.

Ellana just groans. Judging from her sleep posture, she hasn’t moved an inch since her head hit the pillow. Sometime in the night her arms have been injected with cores of lead. She can barely lift them to wipe the sleep from her eyes. Shaky as a newborn halla, she slowly sits up and swings her
legs over the ladder.

Everywhere hurts.

Her legs give out and she slides down, slamming her chin on one of the steps before landing on her ass in the floor.

“Oh my Creators, Ellana, are you alright?” Merrill yelps.

Everywhere hurts more. Ellana looks up at the ceiling, gray with early morning light, and scours her achy body for the motivation to stand up.

Years spent working on farms, plowing up fields, picking orchards, running for hours in the woods and now, after four years of minimum wage jobs and school, and she’s reduced to this. Done in by a ladder and a few hours of gardening.

Pathetic.

Merrill leans down and grabs Ellana by the arm, pulling her up with surprising strength.

“I’m fine,” groans Ellana. “Just - pretend you didn’t see this.”

“You might have overdone it yesterday.” Merrill looks her over and tsks. “Do you want to stay in today and get some rest?”

You should pace yourself. Dr. Felassan’s reaction if she slept today would be unbearable. Gods, she already looks like an incompetent newbie ruining his dig site as it is.

“Hell no. I’ll be fine. I’ll go easy today.”

“Alright.” Merrill doesn’t look too sure but she follows Ellana out to the kitchen anyway.

Every step on their morning hike is agony. She feels like a robot left out in the rain, her joints rusted over, her limbs heavy iron. She lags behind everyone else and she can’t even find the strength to care. For a while Cole walks with her, a bright shadow just within arm’s reach if Ellana were to stumble. Every so often Dr. Felassan, who leads, as always, casts a look her way over his shoulder.

It irritates the shit out of her. She doesn’t want his concern, especially since it comes with that hint of smug victory that he was right about yesterday.

(It’s easy to forget who he really is when he irritates her.)

After a small eternity, they finally arrive at the site. Ellana dons her gloves and picks up the sheers. It takes a minute to find her patch from yesterday. Is it her imagination or did some of the vines grow back over night?

Cole appears next to her with his own pair of trimmers. “Where should I start?” he asks, blinking owlishly at her.

“I don’t know.” Ellana surveys the wall above them. It looks utterly insurmountable. She could work all summer and never see stone. “I feel like a prince in a fairytale, asked to do an impossible task to rescue the princess.”

“The forest is a jealous lover,” says Cole with a nod. “It will not let go so easily.” He surveys the
greenery above them for a moment. “Perhaps we should think in layers and not squares.” He cuts his hand through the air in a line.

“Layers?” Ellana looks at the wall with new eyes.

They formulate a game plan; Cole sits on the ground and trips the vines at their base, while Ellana stands overhead and trims them across. Then they gently pull the vines off the wall in horizontal layers.

It’s more efficient and easier than Ellana’s aimless hacking the day before. But it sucks. Cole works faster than her, happily inching on his knees in the grass, humming a tune in his own little world. Ellana is a slug behind him. A useless, pathetic slug with arms that barely work. Each hack of the machete is agony, each stubborn snip of the clippers makes her arms shake. But when she looks back to survey her progress, it feels like barely inches.

Anger starts simmering in her chest. Her arms barely have the strength to squeeze the hedge clippers or swing the machete and her legs shake with the effort to reach the level on her tip toes.

She throws the hedge trimmers onto the ground. “Please tell me that we have something better than glorified kitchen scissors to take care of this mess,” she says. “I need a chainsaw.”

“This work is too delicate for chainsaws,” says Dr. Felassan, pausing beside her. “There could be carvings or paintings underneath, which you would destroy trying to hack it free. You need to be more careful.”

When he picks up the hedge clippers and hands them to her, it feels like a condemnation. Ellana takes them without a word, an apology sticking stubbornly in the back of her throat. He looks at her as if searching for some kind of flaw, and Ellana’s eyes are probably shooting daggers at him right now but she can’t control it. His features remain inscrutable, so whatever judgement he has passed upon her remains unknown. He lingers in front her, almost as if challenging her to stay something.

And Ellana desperately wants to say something, but she smothers the words before they can escape and set fire to whatever hopes of a professional relationship she could have with him.

Almost disappointed, Dr. Felassan turns and walks away. Ellana turns back to the vines, fingers gripping the hedge clippers tight enough to hurt.

As a child, Ellana did not deal well with criticism. Even the most gentle, well-meaning comment turned her into a stubborn snapping monster that gladly bit any hand that tried to feed it. Of course, after her parents died, Ellana did not deal well with any kind of emotion, but criticism stung most of all. It took everything in her just to get out of bed and give her life some semblance of normalcy and the thought that anyone would dare imply she was doing any part of that wrongly felt akin to lighting a stick of dynamite.

It’s one of the (many) bad habits Istie broke her out of. She taught Ellana that criticism was just a tool of improvement and not personal. That it was up to Ellana’s discernment to consider it or disregard it entirely.

But no matter her years of growth and change, something about the way Dr. Fellassan criticizes her makes Ellana feel eight years old again and feral. Maybe it’s a subject of her own history, maybe it’s because Ellana is trying her best with very little input or advice from anyone, but every reproach of Dr. Felassan’s feels personal.

Right now, she desperately needs Coach Bull’s punching bag, but all she has is the delicate task of
this stupid wall, so Ellana hefts the hedge trimmers *delicately* in her hands and *delicately* snip the vines.

Dr. Felassan eats his lunch of egg salad quickly and returns to excavating his square meter of dirt with barely a word to anyone.

“He has been acting very strange lately,” Merrill whispers. “I’m getting a little worried. He’s not usually this grumpy,” she adds to Ellana. “Really, I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

“His words are stuck,” says Cole. “Sticky, stubborn, everything tastes wrong.”

Once again Ellana glances at everyone’s reaction to such a weird comment, but Bram just nods as if Cole made perfect sense.

Maybe Common isn’t the kid’s first language. Or maybe Cole just speaks a language of his own.

“I haven’t seen a nose like that since – well since my last family reunion,” says Bram. “Starkhaven reunions always get dicey. But I have no doubt it pains him, even if he doesn’t say much about it.”

“He doesn’t like his medicine,” says Cole. “It makes him sleep too much.”

“He doesn’t need any help in that department,” Merrill sighs.

Dr. Felassan glances over at them, as if he can read their lips, so Bram hastily changes the subject to the last fall’s Skyhold/Orlais U field hockey match.

Ellana pushes on for the rest of the afternoon, though she works slower than that morning. Dr. Felassan’s presence burns bright at the edge of her awareness, like the glare of sunlight on a tin roof. His criticism haunts her and not just because of the embarrassment it caused. Ellana had a sneaking suspicion that he hates her, but now the fact that he never acted this quiet or grouchy until Ellana showed up practically confirms it.

So she meets her favorite author, breaks his nose, and earns his eternal loathing.

*Thanks, Fen’Harel,* she thinks viciously. *This is so much better than sipping beach-side mimosas with Josephine in Antiva. What would I do without your meddling?*

Merrill practically frog marches Ellana into the bathroom with orders to take a long hot shower once they arrive back to the cabin. The heat feels amazing on her sore muscles, though the water pressure leaves much to be desired. Once Ellana emerges, pink-skinned and her hair soggy, Merrill has her sit on the bottom bunk while she gives Ellana’s shoulders a massage.

“You really – do not –” Ellana bites back an obscene sounding groan, “have to do all this.”

Merrill’s fingers look brittle and hollow, like little sparrow legs, and yet they knead Ellana’s shoulders with the intensity of a pissed off baker.

“I remember my first days in the field,” she says. “My enthusiasm caused me to throw my back out and I had to lay down for two straight days while Dr. Felassan had to bring me my food and water. It was utterly humiliating.”
“I bet. He probably – wasn’t – very happy with you,” Ellana says in between gasps.

“Oh, no, he wasn’t angry. He took very good care of me. But I was desperate for a good impression and I’m afraid I came off a little foolish. You need to take care, Ellana, before you do something stupid.”

Ellana closes her eyes and lets Merrill work whatever ancient elven magic has possessed her hands. Once she finishes Ellana’s shoulders and back, she moves onto Ellana’s calves, sitting on the floor and pulling them into her lap.

“Merrill,” Ellana protests, reaching down. “I can do –"

“Hush.” Merrill lightly smacks Ellana’s hands away. “Tell me about Wycome. I’ve never been there.”

“It’s the same as any other Dalish town,” Ellana says. “Once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.”

“Well, I grew up outside of Kirkwall, in the mountains. It might be different here. What do you eat for Andruil’s Feast?”

They exchange recipes and stories of past holidays, things Ellana hasn’t thought about in years. No matter how supportive and understanding her Skyhold friends are, it’s different to talk about her own culture with a person who shares it. It’s like she didn’t know just how heavy the weight of carrying her culture alone felt until she shared it with Merrill. Still, it comes with a sting of homesickness, the pain of which she sees reflected in Merrill’s eyes even as they’re both smiling.

“What made you leave?” she asks Merrill.

Instantly she regrets asking. Merrill’s hand on her leg stills and her eyes tighten.

“Oh, just a silly misunderstanding,” she says with a lightness that Ellana does not believe for a second.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I didn’t mean to bring up anything painful.”

Merrill smiles and pats her leg. “It is in the past. Now that your muscles have relaxed, I think we should both head to bed. I know you were miserable today. You need your rest.”

Ellana nods, guilt still coiling in her. “I will. Thanks, Merrill.”

“Da’rahn."

The next morning, Ellana’s stiffness has been significantly reduced and she doesn’t embarrass herself climbing down from bed. She feels spry enough to make toast and scrambled eggs for everyone as they shuffle in and out of the common room.

“Look who’s back from the dead,” says Bram, grinning and with his hair damp. “I admit, I didn’t think you were going to make it home yesterday without falling on your arse.”

“I’ll take that bet any day,” says Ellana.

They make sandwiches together and pack the cooler. Bram gives Ellana an extra thermos for coffee, which she gratefully takes.
The morning dawns cool and bright, a pinkish glow tainting the mist that winds its way through the
trees. Unburdened by apprehension or exhaustion, Ellana fully appreciates the beauty of their hike.
She finds herself whistling an old Dalish tune Dany’s grandmother used to sing as they mucked out
the halla pens. Merrill, grinning from the other end of the cooler they carry, joins in, humming in a
voice clear as crystal.

When they reach the site, Ellana hefts her nemesis, the garden sheers, in her hands with newfound
determination.

“Come on, Cole,” she says. “Let’s kick this wall’s ass.”

He happily accompanies her. Ellana paces herself, finding a happy medium that allows her to feel
productive without making her muscles hate her. Just before lunch, something strange catches her
eye under the thin layer of dirt that lies under the vines. She carefully brushes the wall clean to find a
white splotch lying against the grey stone.

“Dr. Felassan?” she asks, looking over her shoulder for him. “Bram? I think I found something. It
looks like paint.”

Dr. Felassan appears behind her, silent enough to make her jump. She quickly moves out of his way
while he peers over her shoulder at the white splotch. His finger traces where it travels beneath the
vines above it.

“Is that what I think it is?” says Bram from some distance away.

“I believe she found a painting,” he says. “Cole, bring the ladder if you please.”

Cole jumps up to comply and Ellana feels excitement swoop in her gut. She found something,
something real and significant. She prepares herself to climb up the ladder and uncover the rest,
planning how to excavate the vines without damaging the paint underneath.

But when Cole sets up the ladder, Dr. Felassan impatiently climbs up. His arm extends down,
hovering just above her head and motioning for the garden sheers. Ellana’s excitement fades to faint
disappointment as she places them in his grasp. Everyone stops what they’re doing to watch him
gently clip and pull away the vines to reveal what might possibly be a leg painted on the stone
beneath.

Meanwhile, Ellana struggles to keep the resentment at bay – does he not trust her to do this herself?
Isn’t this kind of thing why she’s here in the first place? Why bother requesting an extra hand if he
didn’t want her actually doing anything significant?

One vine nearly as thick as his wrist proves especially stubborn, and as Dr. Felassan fights it, Ellana
notices how dangerously the ladder wobbles. Caught up in their excitement, they forgot to secure it
before he climbed up, and he was too impatient to check it himself.

“Dr. Felassan,” she starts, but he waves her off.

“Give me a moment, please.” he says. “I almost got this.”

He climbs up to the very top step of the ladder, following the stubborn vine upward.

“I would step back down, Doctor,” she says, trying again, but Dr. Felassan pays her no attention.

A small bird darts from the tree overhead, swooping low enough to make Dr. Felassan jerk away just
as he uproots the vine, and that’s when the ladder slips.
Ellana doesn’t think. She jumps behind Dr. Felassan to catch him as if he were some maiden in a fairytale and not two inches taller and several pounds heavier. They both fall to the ground, the wind knocked out of Ellana as he lands on top of her. The back of his head cracks against her nose and pain blooms across her face.

He quickly rolls off her, but Ellana still can’t breathe and something warm and wet streams down over her mouth.

“Ellana!” Dr. Felassan cries, crouching beside her and lifting her into a sitting position, his side warm against her back.

“Oh, merciful Creators!” Merrill gasps, her hand over her mouth. “That’s a lot of blood!”

“Call Harding on the walkie,” Dr. Felassan barks.

“I’m already on it,” says Bram.

Ellana can’t think of anything except the pain radiating from her head. She wipes at her mouth and her hand comes back dripping in her own blood.

Broken nose.

*The universe has a fucked-up sense of humor.*

“She says she’ll meet you at the cabin,” Bram says. “She’s bringing her med kit.”

Dr. Felassan looks down at her. “Can you stand?”

Ellana finds the strength to roll her eyes. “This is not the first broken nose I’ve had, thank you.”

She climbs to her feet, Dr. Felassan’s hands steadying her. The pain flares and blood drips steadily down her face. She must look like something out of a horror movie.

Immediately Dr. Felassan strips his shirt off and hands it to her.

“What are you doing?!” Ellana turns her gaze upwards, focusing firmly on his face.

“You’re bleeding and you’re worried about modesty?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, something faintly resembling a smirk graces his features.

Correction: the universe *and* Dr. Felassan have a fucked-up sense of humor.

“Fair point,” she concedes, taking the shirt and pressing it against her nose.

“Come. I’ll walk you back to the cabin.”

“I can make it on my own,” she protests.

The hike will be shitty enough without his awkward, arrogant silence, but Dr. Felassan shakes his head.

“It was not a suggestion. Come.”

He gestures for her to lead, following close behind, a hand on her elbow to steady her. Thank gods for that because Ellana doesn’t know what she would do if she had to stare at his naked back the
entire way to the cabin.

The trek to the cabin passes in a blur. Dr. Felassan guides her with short directions from behind, but otherwise the silence reigns as unbearable as she predicted. The pain from her nose keeps her from caring very much, however. All she can focus on is the next step ahead and then the next and then the next.

After a small eternity, the cabin finally looms into view. Once inside, Dr. Felassan sits her down at the kitchen table while he busies himself in the kitchen.

Ellana fixes her gaze to the floor.

*I will not ogle my favorite author who hates my guts. I will not ogle my favorite author who hates my guts. I will not ogle my favorite author who hate my guts.*

Oh, who the hell was she kidding? She was never good at resisting temptation, not to mention she refuses to look like some blushing innocent.

Lifting her eyes, she casts her gaze casually about the kitchen before landing on Dr. Felassan.

All those years when Ellana thought of Dr. Felassan in her mind (he refused to have an author photo in the back of his books) she pictured an older gentleman, with a beard, curly grey hair, dressed in one of those cardigans with patches on the elbows. A distinguished grandfather type.

She did not expect someone as young looking as the real Dr. Felassan and definitely not someone with the lean, hard physique he hid under those ratty t-shirts.

Godsdamn.

Freckles dot his shoulders and back like paint speckles as he bends over the sink to wet some paper towels, and Ellana can’t stop looking at the way his back muscles move underneath his skin. The second he turns to her, Ellana averts her gaze again, her cheeks heating up. Hopefully the swelling, bleeding, and eventual bruising will cover up any hints of a blush.

“Hold still and tell me if it hurts,” he says before kneeling in front of her and dabbing the blood away from her face.

This is something Ellana can definitely do on her own in the bathroom, but she says nothing. Mainly because it’s hard to protest when he’s wiping around her mouth, but also because there is something . . . arresting about this proximity.

Despite how unfriendly he’s been, despite the bruising that still lingers under his eyes, Dr. Felassan is a very striking man. The pads of his long, graceful fingers press against her jawline with gentle ease. His eyes are the soft grey of heather in spring, and they focus on her with the same kind of intensity as one of his discoveries. His freckles are starting to peek out from underneath his bruises.

She wonders why he’s going through all this trouble. It’s not like she did any of this for him four days ago.

Once or twice he meets her gaze and there’s something in his eyes, something . . . familiar. Intimate. As if he knows her already. It makes something swoop low in her gut and she casts her gaze down to his shoulders, counting the freckles sprayed across them. The stark line of his collarbone draws her gaze like a magnet.

*Fucking Creators, Ellana, get a hold of yourself. This man hates you. He’s an arrogant prick.*
The front door opens and Ellana throws her gaze in relief to Harding, who stomps dirt off her shoes before stepping inside.

“Is there some kind of nose breaking competition I don’t know about?” she says. She hefts a small duffle bag onto the table beside Ellana. Dr. Felassan steps aside to give her room. Harding peers closely at Ellana’s face.

“Yeah, and the prize is five sovs,” says Ellana before she can help herself.

Dr. Felassan snorts so softly she might have imagined it.

Harding reaches into the duffel bag and pulls out a small flashlight. “I’m going to check for signs of a concussion. Hold still.”

She shines the light in Ellana’s eyes and asks questions about possible symptoms, like dizziness or nausea or ringing in the ears.

“So far you seem okay. I’ll need Solas to monitor your condition for the next couple of days just to make sure. As for your nose, it’s already starting to swell, so it’s hard to tell if it’s actually crooked or not. There’s not a whole lot anyone can do for you, at least until the swelling goes down.” she adds regretfully. “Just shove some gauze in your nostrils, ice it, and take some pain killers.”

“I know,” says Ellana. “I had my nose broken before when I was a kid.”

“Me too! How did yours happen?

Harding zips open her med pack and pulls out rolls of gauze, scissors, and two gel freeze packs that she squeezes to activate. She starts cutting the gauze into small strips.

“Fist fight,” Ellana says. Dr. Felassan raises an eyebrow at her, which she pointedly ignores.

Harding grins. “Me too! Well, technically I ran into a tree, but it was because of a fist fight.”

She hands Ellana strips of gauze and the freeze packs. “If you don’t stop bleeding, which it’s already slowing down, or you see clear discharge drip out of your nose, head to the hospital. Otherwise you just gotta – ”

“Suck it up,” Ellana finishes.

Harding smiles at her again. “You got that right. I can head into town and pick you up some pain killers.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Dr. Felassan speaks up. “I already have some.”

“Perfect, because town is like an hour away.” Harding packs up her kit. “Is there anything else you need?”

Ellana shakes her head. “No. Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

She nods at Dr. Felassan. “He did more than me. Thank him. See you guys in a couple of days.”

Harding leaves, her whistling growing steadily fainter. Dr. Felassan disappears into his room for a minute and reappears with a small bottle of white pills.

“Do you have any medical allergies?” he asks.
"No."

"These are not narcotics, so feel free to help yourself."

She looks up at his nose, which is still slightly swelled, and the greenish bruising around it. Guilt squirms in her gut.

"Don’t you need it for yourself?"

"I do not like pain medication. I have other means of restoring myself."

She remembers Cole mentioning that Dr. Felassan never takes his pills.

He fetches her a glass of water, and for the first time she doesn’t feel like he completely regrets her entire existence. It gives her hope.

"We match," she says, trying to smile and wincing.

The corner of his lips twitch in a smile before he smothers it. She swallows one of the pills.

"I think this makes us even now," she adds. "You don’t have to hate me quite so much."

"I don’t hate you," he says, his eyebrows raising in what seems like genuine surprise. "What makes you think that?"

Is he serious right now? Ellana crosses her arms.

"The only time you speak to me is to criticize me. You barely look at me. It hasn’t exactly been a warm welcome the last couple of days. I figured you were still pissed off about what I did to your nose."

"It was an accident," he says, and he actually looks a little shamefaced. "I am not angry over that."

But he is angry over something, or at least he’s implied it. For the first time, it hits Ellana that Fen’Harel might have foisted her on Dr. Felassan, that he had no choice in whether or not to take her. They might be in this shit situation together.

"Listen," she says, "I don’t know what you were told about me, but I didn’t ask to come here."

There’s a tense pause and she wonders if she just screwed up.

"Are you saying you don’t want to be here?" he asks, tone mild but eyes sharp.

Oh, she definitely screwed up.

"No! I’m saying that it wasn’t my choice to be here."

"That doesn’t answer the question."

Ellana doesn’t know what to say. Nothing seems to be coming out right and any response she has just seems to piss him off even more. “I’m not qualified to be here. I’m sure there are better people out there who should have earned this spot. If I replaced someone that should have been here, I just want you to know that I did not make that decision.”

"I see," he says, after a moment. The intensity of his gaze relaxes, to her relief. "You were a surprise to be sure, but not a replacement. My only qualifications in any assistant is an inquisitive nature and
an eagerness to learn. Do you think those apply to you?"

“Yes,” she says without hesitation.

“Then you are qualified.”

Ellana searches his face for any sign of mockery, but his expression remains placid as a lake in winter.

“It’s that simple?”

“It’s that simple.”

She almost explains that it was his book that got her into college, but shyness keeps her mouth shut. They barely know each other – she can’t come off like a crazy obsessive fan, especially when she’s still not entirely sure he isn’t a total asshole.

“I know you will probably not like this idea, but I suggest that you stay here for the day and rest,” he says.

He’s right, she doesn’t like it. “Just because it wasn’t my idea to come here doesn’t mean that I’m going to be a lazy ass about it.”

“After yesterday, no one could accuse you of laziness,” he says with that glimpse of a smile. She wonders how radiant the full effect would be. “But take it from someone with more recent personal experience. You are going to need your rest. Keep that freeze pack over your face and put the gauze in.”

Ellana gives him a crooked smile. “Is that what you did?”

“Yes. Once I got back from the emergency room.”

“I bet that was a waste of time.”

“It was,” he said grimly.

Despite her misgivings, Ellana takes his advice and lies on the couch with the freeze pack on her face while her nose throbs. She hates to admit it, but this could explain at least some of Dr. Felassan’s unwelcome demeanor that first day. Her nose hurts like a goddamn bitch. She can’t imagine having to traverse two airports and endure both a cramped plane ride and the two hour drive to the cabin with this kind of pain.

This realization and their early conversation gives her hope. Maybe he’s not the bastard she thought he might be.

She kind of wants to find out.
On dhea -- good morning.
Lethallan -- word for someone with whom you are familiar with. It sort of connotes a familial like relationship without it having to be a real blood relationship. Like how some people say "cousin" when they aren't cousins. (Though I'm sure we all know this from the game :) )
Da’rahn -- no problem. An informal "you're welcome" between friends.

Let me state that the fact that you cannot properly romance Lace Harding is a goddamn travesty.
Summer After Sophomore Year, The Emerald Graves Part 2

Chapter Notes

Hot damn everyone! Happy 4th of July. Also, I hope I never go this long between updates again but when you're a teacher the months of April - June really really really suck. They suck a lot. Have fun with this one, folks, it's over 16k long!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Ellana . . . that’s not a butt, is it?”

Ellana tilts her head. “Oh, it’s definitely a butt.”

Harding squints at the painted image on the rock. The whole morning, they both tag-teamed this section of wall, pulling up the vines from their death grip on the stone, carefully brushing the dirt and leaves away to reveal the painted image inch by agonizing inch.

Pointed feet turn to thick calves which turn to what is clearly an elven backside bigger than Ellana’s torso.

“I guess this is what the Dalish considered ‘Elvhen Glory’ back in the day,” Ellana snickers.

“Well, it is a pretty great ass. I almost want a selfie with it.”

“I’ll hoist you up.”

Dr. Felassan clears his throat. They both look behind their shoulders guiltily at him.

“I’m sure the full extent of the painting will be just as stunning as this particular . . . section,” he continues, and Harding blushes.

“You can’t fault us for admiring the art, Dr. Felassan,” says Ellana.

“This is a dig, not a museum, Miss Lavellan.”

“There’s no need to take your inadequacy out on us. Very few men could live up to this.” She raises her hand to gesture at the perfectly proportioned ass hanging above her.

“If I had anything to feel inadequate about, I know I would have the maturity to keep such feelings to myself.”

It’s only been a day since their weird little truce, and Ellana doesn’t quite know what to make of it. Despite their newfound cordiality, a current of antagonism runs through them. Neither of them can resist snarky comments and digs and insinuations, yet none of it feels malicious. In fact, Ellana has fun goading him. It helps her forget just who he is so she doesn’t make a fool of herself.

She and Harding both sneak looks at Dr. Felassan as he walks away.

“Well, he’s right,” Harding whispers. “He’s definitely not inadequate in that department.”
Ellana quickly looks away. Creators, she has got to stop checking him out.

“Let’s get back to work before he has an aneurysm,” she says.

By the time lunch hits, the sun beams down from an unbearable angle, relentless even through the layers of the canopy. But not even the shade of the canvas can protect them from the humidity that has steadily grown since this morning.

Cole wordlessly hands her a water bottle and two pain pills the moment she leans against the table. By now the swelling of her nose has almost disappeared, leaving behind a bruise as deeply purple as Istie’s irises. Merrill fusses over it every morning, and Cole closely monitors her pill intake the whole day. Bram compares the color of her bruising to various flowers to monitor the rate of healing. She’s even caught Dr. Fellassan sneaking glances at it, but whether he’s checking up on her or gloating at her misfortune, it’s hard to say.

The humidity has sapped their usual energy, so everyone eats lunch on the ground, using the cooler as a makeshift table.

“I tell you what, I don’t know how you Dalish do it,” says Bram. “I never thought I would miss the constant freezing drizzle of Starkhaven, but this heat is killing me.”

“We don’t even have AC,” Ellana says. “The best thing to do is put your feet in a bucket of cold water and just sit.”

“I might have to try that when we get back to the cabin. So what specialization are you thinking about for your masters?”

“Specialization?” Ellana asks.

“You know, like how my doctorate is in textiles and Early Chantry, or how Solas and Merrill have theirs in Elvhen Studies.”

“Oh.” Ellana squirms a little. “Actually, I’m not a history major. I’m a computer science major.”

Bram and Merrill actually give her blank stares for a moment.

“Then what in Thedas are you doing here, working yourself to the bone, suffering the death of a thousand mosquito bites?” Bram asks.

“I mean, I love history, I just want a job when I graduate,” says Ellana.

Bram laughs, but Dr. Fellassan gives her a keen look.

“Do you not enjoy computer science?” he asks her.

Ellana shrugs. “It’s harder than I thought it would be. And it’s definitely not one of my passions. But the field is always growing and it pays well and I enjoy the challenge of it.”

“So, you value money over passion?”

He has that same dangerous combination of mild tone and steely eyes as he did in the cabin. Ellana can’t quite tell if he means to be combative, but her hackles rise all the same.

“I value stability,” Ellana says, matching her tone to his. “I know what it’s like to not have it.”
“Stability is not necessarily a guarantee for joy. Is there purpose in a passionless existence?”

“There are other things besides history that make me happy. I’m not going to live in a depression spiral because I’m not majoring in my favorite subject.”

“You’d be surprised how much of your life your work takes up. It will leave you very little time to pursue your happiness elsewhere. It’s not a waste to chase your dream, even if you risk financial instability. There are options for you.”

Ellana shoots him a look. “You sound like my academic adviser. He wasn’t thrilled with my choice either.”

Dr. Felassan bows his head, as if humbly accepting a victory. It feels like a hot lick of flame on her temper. “Perhaps you should heed his warning. Speaking from experience, I had many paths I could have turned my life towards, but though the one I chose has cost me, it’s worth every risk and sacrifice to be in places like this, uncovering our own history. I can see your love for this. I would hate to see such potential wasted on a subject you do not love.”

Who the hell does he think he is, some kind of wise mentor from one of Krem’s fantasy novels?

“I’ve made my choice and I’m sticking to it. And when you are paying for my tuition, then maybe I’ll listen to your suggestions,” she tells him sweetly.

That shuts him up real quick. In fact, he presses his lips in a thin, white line as if trying desperately to hold himself back.

“Duly noted,” he says stiffly, and mercifully drops the subject.

The smell of clover hits her like one of the Chargers. At first, she smells only the coming rain as the clouds pile overhead, but then the breeze picks up, bringing with it the scent of clover and honeysuckle so strong she almost tastes it.

Immediately, flashes of memories follow. Not any specific event—just Wycome. The slant of the setting sun on Istie’s porch. The stream near her parents’ graves. Market Day. The taste of Mihris’s apples.

Longing wells up from some deep place within her, bringing with it the sudden rush of tears. Ellana grips the garden sheers tighter and takes a deep breath, blinking the tears away before anyone can see them.

She always misses home. Always. It’s a splinter inside of her, a niggling pain that never leaves despite any other newfound happiness. Over the last few years, Ellana has learned to lock those memories away, along with those of her parents. If she doesn’t think about it, it doesn’t hurt, and Skyhold has offered her plenty of distractions.

But there is nothing to distract her here. The Dales surround her, a mockery of home that does little to ease her pain. Never has so much and so little separated her from home. Istie’s porch lies only a two-hour drive away and yet it could be across the Waking Sea for all Ellana could set foot there.

Harding quickly volunteers to help carry the cooler back to the cabin when she sees Bram pick it up. They chat happily ahead of their group. Harding’s laugh echoes like birdsong at one of Bram’s corny
jokes, like something out of one of Josephine’s books. She looks around for someone—anyone—to notice this, but Merrill and Solas are in deep conversation about soil layers, which leaves only Cole.

Hell.

Ellana sidles up to him and whispers close to his ear. “Okay, it’s not just me, right? I’m not like, imagining things with the two of them, am I?”

He gives Harding and Bram a thoughtful glance, as if seeing how two puzzle pieces might fit together.

“He’s grey,” he says, voice soft. He looks around as if trying not to get caught. “Harding is sunlight. Her smile fills dark corners. Her freckles are stars on a moonless night. Her hair is the bright copper of new coins.”

Ellana’s eyebrows jump up. Whoo boy, she might have horribly misjudged this entire situation. “You’re not in love with Harding, are you?”

“Of course not,” says Cole, looking bewildered. “I imagine that’s what Bram feels when he looks at her.”

“Oh.” Cole must have a poetic soul. She can’t help but think that Varric would love to get his hands on a mind like that. “So how did it all start?”

“Bram was jotting notes and he didn’t see the cliff. Harding grabbed the back of his shirt and saved his life.”

“Well, that is certainly one way to earn someone’s eternal devotion.”

Harding leaves them with a cheery wave, climbing into a comically oversized, mud splattered truck. Bram stays and watches it leave before going back inside.

Like a hyperactive toddler, once her brain wakes up, sleep is impossible. So, at six thirty in the morning on her first day off, Ellana climbs out of bed on shaky legs and makes coffee in the ghost town of the kitchen. The only sounds besides the coffee maker are chirping birds and faint snoring coming from Bram’s room.

Ellana breathes in deep and soaks up the quiet. She hasn’t had a moment to herself since she got here. Once her coffee is poured, she creeps out onto the porch.

The sun has yet to crest over the horizon, the morning still grey and new. Cole sits in the grass beyond the porch in a threadbare t-shirt, feeding lettuce and strawberries to a fat brown nug.

“Shhh,” he says, voice barely a whisper. “Don’t scare him.”

Silently, Ellana leans against the railing of the porch and sips her coffee, watching. The nug sniffs Cole’s fingers when he runs out of strawberries, and then burrows its nose into his hand in an impatient demand for affection. Cole dutifully strokes down its back and scratches it behind the ears. Eventually it tires of his attentions and scampers off into the grass.

“You like nugs?” she asks him, walking out into the yard.

Cole looks up at her. “Nugs are kind. Almost everything is bigger than them, but they’re still happy.
If you hold out your hand, they will nuzzle it. It's how they call you ‘friend.’

“Have you given him a name?”

“Don’t they have their own names?” he asks, “in their language?”

Ellana studies him a moment, gauging his seriousness. Either he still maintains the innocence of a seven-year-old or he’s the world’s slickest smartass, and she’s still not quite sure which one it is. She decides to play along until she figures it out.

“Well, yeah. But we can’t really speak nug, so . . . he should have a human nickname, don’t you think? Wouldn’t it make him feel accepted?”

“I suppose. I’ll have to think about it.” He stands up. “Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

It’s weird the way he asks her this, as if he’s reciting lines from a script.

“Sort of. Just wish I could sleep in. What about you?”

Cole shakes his head. “I don’t sleep well at night. I don’t like the dark.”

“Why not?” she asks.

Something in Cole’s face shutters closed and she regrets her question.

“I have nightmares,” he says simply and she lets the matter drop.

“I’m going to take a look around,” she says instead. “I haven’t gotten to do much exploring around here. You wanna come?”

“I can show you the river nearby.”

Cole leads her happily down a deer trail barely visible through the long grass and boulders. Sure enough, roughly twenty minutes later they come to the shore of a wide and shallow river. Trees stretch across either side of it, as if trying to reach each other’s hands.

A few feet away the sandy beach appears, a rope swing tied to the trunk of a gnarled oak. It’s a perfect swimming hole, which is probably why they put the cabin nearby.

“Are there other cabins nearby?” she asks.

“The closest one is almost a mile away,” Cole replies. “We are the last one. It’s the closest we could get to the site and still have a place to sleep and shower in. Even so, Solas and Bram brought tents and sleeping bags. I hope we camp by the site. I like sleeping out in the open.”

“I haven’t done that in a long time,” she says wistfully.

By the time they make it back, Merrill and Bram are bustling in the kitchen.

“Oi, there you are!” Bram says from the stove. “Thought I was going to have to call Harding for a search.”

“I was showing her the river,” says Cole.

Merrill’s eyes light up. “Oh, I love the river! Isn’t it beautiful? One day we should take a swim.”
“You two hungry or what?” asks Bram. “We’re making pancakes.”

Cole’s eyes light up, and Ellana smiles.

“We’re coming.”

In the kitchen, Merrill mixes the batter and pours it in the pan and Bram flips the pancakes with unerring timing. He’s humming the jaunty kind of tune that accompanies drinking songs, and Merrill occasionally hums in harmony with him. Standing side by side, their short hair sticking out, they almost look like siblings.

More coffee percolates happily, and Ellana helps herself to another cup.

“Where’s Dr. Felassan?” she asks.

Bram snorts. “Ach. You won’t see that egghead until at least ten o’clock on a weekend. He’s a late riser.”

“He likes to sleep,” Cole says. “He likes his dreams.”

True to their word, Dr. Felassan does not emerge until the feast of pancakes lies in ruins on their plates. Merrill has managed to salvage two flapjacks from Cole’s unending appetite and left them cooling on the counter by the stove.

Instead of his usual tea, Dr. Felassan aims straight for the coffee – so black it should be an anomaly in space – and pours himself a splash of it into his usual tea cup. He downs it like a shot, grimacing the entire time. Ellana watches this with a raised brow, but says nothing.

The day belongs to them. Cole naps periodically on the couch. Merrill embroiders flowers and vines on a worn pair of jeans. Dr. Felassan has disappeared outdoors somewhere.

Ellana investigates the back porch, Varric’s book in hand. It’s wide and shaded, with rocking chairs and a table set for six with squashy swivel chairs. To her surprise, Dr. Felassan already occupies one of the rocking chairs with a book of his own.

A very familiar book.


Dr. Felassan jumps and nearly drops the book.

“Oh. Yes.” he says, oddly embarrassed. “I’ve promised Varric I would read this for months, but I keep forgetting.”

Ellana stares at him. “You know Varric,” she says flatly. It’s not even a question anymore.

“Of course I know Varric,” says Dr. Felassan, blinking up at her. “I teach at Skyhold when I’m inbetween digs. Our offices are in the same building.”

Ellana knows this, obviously. For years she had dreamed of bumping into him on campus, casually waving at each other from across the Quad like old friends – a wish that has come true in the worst way possible, because the Universe loves its little jokes. Now she will take the secret admiration of his work to her fucking grave. He’s smug enough as it is.
“I’ve never seen you there,” she says instead, plopping into the rocking chair next to him.

“I’ve been away the last few semesters, but I’ve taught there for years.”

“Years? Just how old are you?”

His eyebrows raise up at her impertinence. The question was blurted out without thinking, but Ellana stands by it. It’s impossible to tell his age just from looking. Dr. Felassan does not have the bearing of someone young, but neither does he look old. He’s like some ageless immortal.


Ellana bites her tongue to keep it from sticking out at him, à la Sera, before opening her own book.

They read quietly for a little while. It’s strangely companionable, though hard on her concentration. Ellana watches his expressions in the corner of her eye and tries to guess what scene he might be reading. In fact, she spends more time trying not to notice him than actually reading the book. In the quiet stillness, with no work or argument or other people to distract her, the reality of the situation creeps up on her.

This is the Dr. Solas Felassan, breathing and hmming and being a smug jackass less than a foot away from her. She called him old! How is this even her life?

Eventually, Merrill peaks her head out onto the balcony.

“Bram is back from the store,” she says. “He says to get the grill ready.”

“I’m on it,” says Ellana.

To her surprise, Bram knows how to handle a grill. She half expects him to burn his eyebrows off, but if you keep his notebook out of his hand, Bram can handle himself with minimal casualties. Ellana makes the marinade out of the herbs and spices he brought for her, while Dr. Felassan and Merrill prepare the salad and corn. By the time Harding shows back up with a pitcher of homemade lemonade, they have a pretty impressive spread lined up.

Merrill says a quiet prayer of thanks to the Creators before she digs in. Ellana watches her with a vague sense of guilt and another stab of homesickness. Istie has never so much as snacked on a strawberry without thanking the Creators for it first. Ellana hasn’t prayed to them in years.

The food is fantastic. Ellana has to force herself to slow down so other people can get their own share. She hasn’t had anything grilled in forever; Orlesians pretty much just bake everything, and Skyhold banned grills at the apartments after a student prank burned down half a building a couple of decades ago.

“My compliments to the chef,” says Harding, “For both excellent food and the fact that his cabin is still in one piece.”

“I can’t take credit for the taste,” says Bram, but his face goes pink. “Ellana did the marinating.”

Harding looks at her speculatively. “You have to tell me what you put in this. It’s amazing.”

“I could cop out and say it’s an old Dalish secret, but really it’s just salt, pepper, cumin, and dried spindleweed.”

“That’s why it’s so aromatic.” Harding takes another happy bite. “I love Dalish cooking. You know,
between your seasoning and your moonshine, the Dalish could open up a bar and grill around here and make a killing.”

Ellana smiles at the thought. “You really think so?”

“Oh yeah,” says Harding. “Maybe not, like, in the middle of Val Royeaux, but around the border towns? Definitely.”

“I have to admit that I’m a little surprised that you’re the only Dalish volunteer I’ve seen,” says Bram. “When word got out that we found Dalish ruins, I figured they would come from all over. Instead, there’s just you two.”

Dr. Felassan speaks up before Ellana or Merrill could craft a reply. “The Dalish have little interest in factual history, preferring their stories and misguided traditions. They shut out any information that isn’t congruent with what their Keepers have passed down.”

A spark of anger flickers in her chest. Ellana breathes in deep and slowly. Her eyes slide over to Merrill, expecting her to gently correct Dr. Felassan’s massively oblivious reason. But her friend keeps her eyes averted and her mouth closed. So Ellana jumps in.

“There’s a little more to it than that,” she says with all the delicacy she can muster.

“Oh?” Dr. Felassan says. “Pray tell.”

Amazing the amount of challenge one can show in raising their brow just a fraction.

“Yes, I would love to hear from a Dalish perspective,” Bram adds in, cheerfully oblivious.

Ellana hesitates for a moment, because explaining a Dalish perspective on this, particularly her Dalish perspective, would not be delicate or pretty.

What the hell. They asked for it.

“Well, from a Dalish perspective, what generally happens is that no one cared about preserving our heritage for a long time. Ruins, paintings, artifacts were found, but no government or universities would ever send anyone down to excavate them. So, we did it ourselves. We dug up the ruins, we displayed the artifacts in our shops, homes, restaurants. Then, when our heritage suddenly became relevant to humans, they refused to work with us.”

Gods, just thinking about it incenses her. The volume of her voice climbs and she can’t stop it.

“Field teams would swoop into people’s villages and backyards and woods and start excavating without so much as an introduction, and ban us from the sites. And then, when they were done, they’d pack up all our art and our artifacts and ship them off to museums that we never get to see. So really, the Dalish perspective is that once our heritage falls into human hands, it’s lost.”

“I understand your point of view, but you don’t have all the facts,” says Dr. Felassan. “First of all, Dalish locals were never outright banned from participating in the field work; they were just kept from excavating delicate artifacts because they lacked any official training or experience –”

“Experience?” The word bursts out of her. “We excavated our own sites for decades, now all of a sudden we don’t have any experience?”

His brows narrow, giving him the air of a bull, head bowed and ready to charge. “Yes, and many of those artifacts, paintings, and heritage sites were damaged, some irrevocably, because of the
carelessness of untrained hands. I admire the effort and the sentiment of preserving one’s heritage, but those sites would have been better off waiting for those field teams –”

“So they can cart away everything we worked so hard to recover –"

“There is nothing stopping the Dalish from seeing their artifacts displayed properly in museums where everyone can appreciate them except for their own stubborn pride and disinterest in the rest of Thedas.”

“The only reason why we’re untrained and careless is because we can’t benefit from the education that everyone else gets. It’s not fair to judge us on doing the best we could do with what we had.”

“It’s entirely fair. What’s stopping them from perusing their education?”

Ellana blinks at him. “Money.”

“Is it really? You’re here. Merrill’s here. There are thousands of sovereigns worth of scholarships exclusive to Dalish applicants that go unused every year. If money is all that stands in their way, then why is this so? Or is the real culprit a lack of interest?”

“I was lucky,” Ellana snaps. “I had help. I had an opportunity that no one else would ever get and I took it. I’m not an example.”

“Is that so? Because you’re just proving my point.”

Ellana stands up so fast the table shakes, sending the iced tea sloshing in their cups. The urge to reach across the table and slap him challenges the limit of her self-control. Not even the wary look on his face gives her any satisfaction.

“Excuse me for a moment,” she says and leaves.

Merrill finds her an hour later sitting on top of a boulder, back resting against a gnarled tree. Up this high, she can see the twinkle of the river in the setting sun.

“It’s going to get dark soon.” Merrill climbs up the side of the rock with ease. “I brought you a flashlight.”

“I’ll go back in a minute,” she says, even though the thought makes her cringe. “I made an ass of myself, didn’t I?”

“I don’t think so.” Merrill sits down next to her. “You’re very passionate about our culture, just more so than anyone expected. Plus, I think Solas antagonized you a bit.”

“Just a bit?”

“He’s just as passionate as you are. He just sees things a little differently.”

A little differently. Understatement of the freaking summer right there.

“How do you see it?” she asks. Does she have an ally with Merrill or does she fight her battles alone?

Merrill hesitates. “The issue at hand is complicated. Do I think that the Dalish should be more involved in their own culture? Of course. But they don’t understand how to do it and they don’t
listen to people who try to instruct them.”

“Have you tried? I can understand not responding to humans, but it coming from a fellow Dalish
would be different.”

A shadow crosses Merrill’s face. “Sometimes I think that makes it worse.”

“What do you mean?”

A long moment of silence passes. It looks as if Merrill is trying to gear herself up to say something. “I
am one of the banal’varem,” she says so softly that Ellana can barely hear it over the breeze.

“What? What happened?”

Banal’varem – it’s one of Ellana’s worst nightmares. To be officially exiled out of a clan means that
no Dalish clan will have you – not in Antiva, not in the Dales, not in Ferelden – nothing could be
more heartbreaking.

It’s the worst thing that can happen to a Dalish. Even Ellana hadn’t been officially exiled. It takes
murder or rape – something horrific – to earn exile. Something that Merrill is definitely not capable
of.

“I found an Eluvian. It was lying in a cave my cousin and I were exploring. Of course, I got excited.
Those are so rare and this one still had most of the glass intact.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?”

An Eluvian. They’ve remained one of Arlathan’s biggest mysteries. No one knows exactly what
they were used for, only that they were somehow integral to Elvhen society. A fully intact Eluvian
has never been found – only fragments and pieces that birth more questions than they answer.

Merrill nods. “The whole clan got really excited about it. My Keeper wanted to put together a team
to extract it, but part of the frame had fused with the stalactites. There was no way to get it out in one
piece without special tools and expertise that we didn’t have. She wouldn’t listen to me, so . . . I
contacted Kirkwall University and they sent their own field team.”

“And they exiled you? For that?”

“After the field team extracted it, they sent it to a museum to be restored and studied. Because of me,
we lost our Eluvian, we lost a chance to learn about our own culture for ourselves, rather than second
hand from somewhere else. My Keeper was furious, but not as much as the rest of the clan. They
hated me.”

“That’s bullshit,” Ellana says flatly. “You were protecting your culture. They would have fucked it
up by themselves and then no one would have learned anything.”

“Now you sound like Solas.”

Ellana stops.

... artifacts, paintings, and heritage sites were damaged, some irrevocably, because of the
carelessness of untrained hands . . .

“This is different,” she says, but the discomfort persists. “An Eluvian is very delicate and it needed
special tools, like you said. I can understand needing help. But what about ruins like the one here? I
have no training. I’m just yanking vines down. And I know a lot of my clan who would love to do this with me. Hell, they would do it for free.”

Merrill nods. “I think that our people should be more involved. There just isn’t an easy answer.”

“Yeah,” Ellana sighs. “The older I get, the less I see easy answers for anything.”

“Come, lethalin.” Merrill squeezes her shoulder. “I saved the leftovers for you, if you’re hungry.”

On their way back, Ellana works up the courage to speak up about her own experiences.

“I’m not exiled like you are, not officially.” she says finally. Merrill pauses and turns towards her. “My Keeper still speaks to me, but she’s the only one. Apparently, they decided I was a traitor the second I moved to Orlais. Like humans tainted me. It took me three years to get the money to come back and visit, and when I did . . .” Ellan swallows. “It wasn’t pretty.”

Merrill takes Ellana’s hand and squeezes it.

“One of these days their love for you will overcome their bitterness,” she says. “You just have to be patient.”

“How long have you been waiting?”

Merrill looks away. “You just have to be patient.”

Dr. Felassan has disappeared into his room by the time Ellana returns. Thank the Creators. She doesn’t know if she could look at his smug face without doing something rash. Instead she grabs her book and joins Bram on the couch while he shouts wrong answers at a trivia game show.

“I’m sorry, I’m not being too distracting, am I?” he says during the next commercial break.

Ellana shakes her head. “I could read in a hurricane.”

“What book is that? It’s not a history book, is it?” His nose scrunches.

“You don’t like history books? You’re an archeologist.”

Bram shrugs. “I would like them more if they weren’t so dry. It’s more fun discovering history and discussing it than reading about it in a book.”

“Well, this is definitely not a history book.” Ellana holds up Varric’s AR copy, and Bram gasps.

“Oh, sweet Maker, is that the next Hard in Hightown book? I thought it didn’t come out for another three months!”

“This is a review copy,” says Ellana. “Varric gave it to me to read this summer. You like his books?”


He eyes it a bit like a dog eyes a steak. Ellana holds it out. “You want to borrow it?”

“Is that legal?”

“Well you can’t spout off spoilers to everyone you meet, but what Varric’s publisher doesn’t know
won’t hurt them, and he’s not going to care.”

“You finish it first,” he says, though it looks like it cost him to be so generous.

Ellana smiles. “I’m a fast reader, don’t worry.”

Bram does prove a bit more distracting than Ellana anticipated after that, if only because every time she laughed or gasped or made any facial expression at all, he would demand to know what happened to cause it and then immediately follow that up with “No no don’t tell me! I don’t want any spoilers!”

Ellana stays up half the night to finish the book. Everyone else drifts to bed, save for Cole, who knits on the floor in front of the lamp.

“You know how to knit?” she asks, rather surprised.

“I don’t think about bad things when I knit,” he explains. “And it lets me create things that help people.”

His fingers fly with the needles, and Ellana watches for a moment, entranced. “What are you making?”

“A sweater.”

“It’s awfully tiny for a sweater.”

“It’s for birds. When they’re hurt from oil spills. They need the sweaters to keep them warm after they’ve been washed.”

Cole answers her questions, but she can feel the hint of impatience in them, and she leaves him alone after that. They sit in companionable silence until Ellana finishes the book, her eyes barely open.

By the time she wakes up the next morning, it’s almost eleven o’clock and all that’s left of breakfast is cold boiled eggs and a couple of sad pancakes.

“Well look who’s joined the living,” says Bram. He’s already halfway through Varric’s book, which she left on the coffee table with a note for him.

Merrill darts over to her anxiously. “Are you feeling sick?”

“I stayed up too late reading,” says Ellana, nodding to the book in Bram’s hand.

She can feel Dr. Felassan’s eyes on her from the dining room table, but she studiously ignores him.

“A sacrifice that will not go unappreciated,” says Bram, holding up the book in toast to her. “There’s still some coffee left, if Solas hasn’t stolen it all.”

“A baseless fear,” adds Dr. Felassan. “Please, Ellana, help yourself.”

She gives him a bit of a side eye on her way to the coffee maker. Is he one of those types that becomes politer the more he hates someone? He definitely looks it, sitting there with his cardigan and his half-moon glasses perched on his nose, like the ultimate caricature of a stuffy professor. He must be a nightmare to have for class.
Nothing looks more dark, secretive, and begging for exploration than the woods on a cloudy day. Judging from the scene out the window, a storm will definitely hit tonight. Ellana doesn’t care. She laces up her hiking boots and grabs her compass and a bottle of water. Cole joins her, a silent shadow in his wide brimmed gardener’s hat.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

Ellana shrugs. “I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

They head not north or east or south but up, climbing over low hanging boulders, using trees to pull them over stubborn hills. Ellana’s legs are killing her – Creators it’s been so long since she’s really hiked like this, in the wild with a trail – but Cole voices no complaints. In fact, he’s so quiet Ellana sometimes forgets he’s even there.

At the top of the hill is an outcropping of rock. Ellana edges out until she’s sitting, legs dangling. Far below a sea of green stretches out, mist rolling down the other hills. It’s so beautiful that Ellana’s breath catches.

Creators she has missed the Dales. How could any other place in Thedas possibly compare?

“I don’t think I’ve been this high before,” says Cole. He stands a little ways back from the edge.

“It’s only a few hundred feet,” says Ellana. “I love climbing up high – you can see so much. Come look.”

Cautiously, Cole sits and scoots up close to the edge beside Ellana. She points to the grey specks in the distance.

“That’s town way over there.” Her finger swings towards a wooden structure peeking out of the trees on another hill. “That’s one of the ranger buildings, pretty sure.”

Cole looks down at her legs swinging. “I don’t think I like this.”

Ellana laughs at the slight hitch in his voice. “Okay. We’ll leave in a minute.”

Cole’s relief is obvious as he leads them down the hill, outpacing even Ellana and her long strides. He slows only when the ground evens out beneath them.

A soft breeze stirs, bringing that heavy, heady scent of rain and greenery one only smells deep in the woods. Ellana stops and breathes it in.

“You missed this place,” Cole says softly. “Very much.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You breathe like you are trying to drink the trees.”

It’s taken a few days, but Ellana is starting to get the hang of Cole’s weird . . . Cole-isms. “These kinds of trees don’t grow in Skyhold. It smells entirely different up there and I miss it.” Ellana pauses. “I miss it more than I thought I did.”

“I like trees. Trees don’t hurt people.”

Ellana gives him a sideways glance. Maybe she’s not entirely used to Cole-isms.
He gives her a little smile, barely more than a quirk of his lips. “If you listen, you can hear it all reaching for the sun.”

Which sounds a little crazy, but Ellana understands it. The woods had a certain sound to it, beneath the birds and the wind and the streams. The barest whisper of a groan.

“My babae used to tell me when I was a kid that if you listened close enough, you could hear the trees growing, and that my bones made the same sound, only I couldn’t hear it.”

“That makes perfect sense to me.”

Monday they drag themselves back to the site. The clouds persist, giving them all a break from the sun. Harding appears around lunch, an apparition carrying an ax strapped to a picnic basket.

“I don’t know about you, but I want to see more butts,” she tells Ellana.

Dr. Felassan raises an eyebrow.

“I mean, ancient and sacred art,” she amends, giving Ellana a sideways smile.

“Take care not to damage the rock,” Dr. Felassan warns.

“No worries here, I’ve had lots of practice separating vines from endangered trees. This shouldn’t be that much different.”

Ellana is happy to have her partner in crime back. Together they reveal the tall column of the elf’s figure, up well sculpted back muscles and thick arms all the way up to his bald head.

“It looks like Dr. Felassan on steroids,” Ellana whispers and Harding giggles – but not without looking behind her shoulder afterwards.

They’ve abandoned all pretense of following the efficient, careful pattern that Cole and Ellana started in favor of uncovering their new friend. He sticks out, a bald spot in the tangled mess.

“Behold!” Ellana says, flinging her arms so dramatically that she nearly falls off the ladder and has to windmill a second to recapture her grip.

Everyone gets up to inspect the painting, Dr. Felassan trading places with her on the ladder.

“The colors are remarkably intact,” says Dr. Felassan, peering closely. “The blending is remarkable.”

“Sad that he’s naked, though,” Bram says. “I was hoping to get an idea of the kind of buckles to look for.”

“Did they even wear armor?” Harding asks. “Because I’m having my doubts.”

“Yes,” says Dr. Felassan. “Though this coloring could suggest camouflage.”

“Now that would be interesting,” says Bram, squinting at the painting with new interest.

“Why is the painting here, though,” Harding asks. “Is this some kind of art gallery?”

“It’s difficult to say without knowing what the purpose of these ruins are,” says Dr. Felassan. “Though my suspicions lie with this being a fort of some kind for the Emerald Knights. Of course,
we can’t confirm anything until we discover more artifacts. Good work, you two.”

They take a small break for lunch, but Ellana and Harding wolf down their sandwiches as soon as they can and get back to work. Something crackles through Ellana’s blood, a desperate curiosity. Before today it all been stone and walls and dirt – it didn’t look much different than the rest of the Emerald Graves to be honest.

But seeing that painting – in all it’s ridiculous, naked glory – makes this all a real place, built by real hands of real people. What else sits, hiding, waiting for Ellana to uncover it?

After an hour, Ellana and Harding uncover a sideways triangle that slowly turns into the point of a foot.

“Look like it’s another pin-up model,” says Ellana, while Harding snorts.

By the end of the day they’ve uncovered half of a squatting elven man with very firm thighs. Ellana hacks and clips and pulls at the vines until someone gently and determinedly pulls the hedge trimmers from her filth encrusted hands.

“It’s time to head back,” says Dr. Felassan.

She can smell him: sweat and deodorant and dirt.

Ellana spins around, driven by the kind of instinct that never lets you sleep with your back to the door. The wall presses against her back but Dr. Felassan does not move to give her room. He stands so close she can count his freckles.


“You’ve discovered our first significant find,” he says, and a part of her perks up at the pride in his tone. “I would be just as excited. But if you push yourself too much today, you will suffer for it tomorrow and the day after.”

Indeed, as Ellana helps them pack up for the day, her arms quiver like a bow string. And when they all start the journey back to their cabin, the exhaustion settles like an anchor around her neck.

“Please tell me if this is an offense,” says Harding with a hesitant glance at Ellana, “but I love your vallaslin. The design is so beautiful. Which god does it honor?”

Creators, if that’s what Harding worried was an offensive question, she had clearly never set foot in Orlais. “Thank you. I don’t find it offensive. My vallaslin honors the goddess –”

“Ghilan’nain,” supplies Dr. Felassan. “The mother of the Halla.”

“Right.” Ellana shoots him a strange look.

“Ghilan’nain.” Harding tastes the word, trying to get the pronunciation down. “How does a Dalish get their vallaslin?”

“It’s part of a ceremony,” Ellana explains. “Like a coming of age thing. Once a Dalish reaches sixteen, they can ask for a vallaslin ceremony.”

“You have to ask for one?” Bram slows his stride to get beside Ellana.
“It represents maturity so you have to be able to sit still and have the keeper tattoo your face without flinching or crying. So, you should only ask for it if you think you’re ready.”

Harding winces. “What happens if someone cries?”

“They stop the ceremony,” says Dr. Felassan before Ellana can reply. “And then the village mocks you for your unfinished vallaslin until you finish it.”

“It’s not as harsh as that,” says Ellana, hating the way Harding’s face twists up in subtle disapproval. It’s a look she’s seen too many times, usually accompanied by some variation of Dalish savage. “People who get their ceremony too early usually do it because they’re cocky. They want to hurry up and be the first of their friends to get theirs. They think they’re so grown up when really they just wanted to look cool. It’s not really mocking so much as pointing out how immature they really are.”

“Oh,” says Harding, her face clearing. “What about your design? Did you get to pick yours out?”

“The clan kind of picks it out. Or, at least that’s how it’s done down south. Your vallaslin is supposed to represent a part of yourself that connects to a god. So, like, someone who is really good at making things should have the vallaslin for June, god of crafts. It can also be a personality thing, like someone with Sylaise vallaslin could be warm and comforting. So, the Keeper mostly decides because they have seen you grow up and they know the kind of person you are and would turn into.”

“So why are you Ghili – Ghilan’nain?” Bram asks. “Or is that too personal of a question?”

“It depends on the Dalish. I don’t mind. It’s kind of an inside joke. Ghilan’nain’s other name is the Mother of Monsters and well . . . I was kind of an asshole when I was a kid. A major asshole, actually.”

Merrill scoffs from up ahead. “I can hardly believe that.”

Dr. Felassan snorts softly enough that only Ellana catches it.

“Oh, believe it,” says Ellana. “My parents died when I was seven, and I was kind of passed around the clan for a while before my Keeper took me in. And the way I handled it was to be an angry, hateful little jackass who would pick a fight with anyone.”

She could feel the stares of everyone on her, especially Dr. Felassan.

Harding gives her a face of sorrow. “Oh, my Maker, Ellana, I’m sorry. That’s awful.”

Ellana shrugs, uncomfortable with her pity. “I mean, it was a car wreck. It’s not like it was anybody’s fault. I turned out alright thanks to Istie. She still calls me da’ghilan, which means—”

“Little monster.” A bit of a smirk plays around Dr. Felassan’s mouth. It should not be attractive. (It is.)

She spent the rest of the walk regaling her team with horror stories from her youth: like the time she burnt down Varnehn’s barn (accident) or broke Nerien’s arm (not an accident) or told her primary teacher to go suck Fen’harel’s balls (Dr. Felassan’s ears went a little red at that one).

In fact, his attention does not waver the entire time, as if she’s describing dinner with Empress Celene.

“What made you stop?” Cole asks. He’s grown more and more intrigued as her stories went on.
Ellana shrugs. “I guess I got tired of being angry. It’s exhausting, actually, to keep it up. I had to let it go some time.”

(Is her clan’s anger any more sustainable? Will it last as long as hers did, years and years and years?)

Her stories inspire the others, and soon most of them are sharing their own childhood misadventures. Merrill once cut her finger on a thorn and pretended to do blood magic to curse a boy who had been teasing her too much. Bram had superglued all his cousins’ shoes together on a dare. Harding shot a man trying to rob the convenience store on her way to archery practice.

Only Dr. Felassan and Cole remain quiet. Ellana wants to push, wants to tease, but Cole’s strangeness might not have stemmed from a normal or healthy childhood. As for Dr. Felassan . . . his worst childhood crime is probably putting that stick up his ass, since it still seems stuck there.

“Can you go find Solas?” Merrill looks up from chopping the tomatoes. “He’s somewhere by the river bank. Cole’s napping and I don’t want to disturb him, but dinner is almost ready.”

Soon after they all came home and Harding said her goodbyes, Dr. Felassan had taken a leather-bound journal and walked back out. He’s acted strange this whole evening, going from the staring and rapt attention he’d given her to the abrupt avoidance of all his co-workers (he had barely said goodbye to Harding before he left).

She finds him sitting beneath a thick oak tree by the river bank, sketching something lightly in his journal. The reflection of the evening sun on the water casts a strange glow around him and dances in the tree canopy. It makes his skin look luminous, like one of the Creators right out of a story book.

“Dr. Felassan?” She steps closer to him, a twig snapping underneath her feet.

The pencil jerks in his hand as he looks up at her.

“Sorry. Merrill wants you to know that dinner is almost ready.”

Almost involuntarily, her gaze drops down to his sketchbook, which is then closed quietly and swiftly.

“Ah. Thank you. I tend to lose track of time when I draw.” He stands up with the kind of smooth grace that Ellana could never achieve. “Shall we?”

Barely a minute of quiet passes before he speaks.

“Did you know there are ways to remove vallaslin?”

Ellana nearly trips. “What? What kind of question is that?”

“A simple one. Do you or do you not?”

“I do. So what?”

“Do you know the history of vallaslin?”

Of course, she knew – she read about it in his damn book. “Why” she asks slowly, hackles rising.

“They were once slave markings,” he says as if he didn’t hear her. “They were never a coming of age ceremony and they never honored your gods.”
Your gods. Strange wording from the man who wrote “our creators” in his book.

“I know. I’ve . . . read your book.” Gods, it’s a little embarrassing to admit that now.

Something in his eyes light up. “Oh really? You’ve never mentioned this before.”

“I mean, I skimmed most of it. It's a big book,” she lies, shrugging her shoulder. “But I read about your thoughts on vallaslin.”

“They’re aren’t just thoughts – they’ve been backed up with evidence.”

“Evidence? Did an ancient elf walk up to you and explain it?”

He gives her a look that clearly belies how childish he thinks of her reply and does not dignify her with his own.

“Isn’t archeology just a subjective interpretation of fragments that are missing the full context?”

“I’m not making conjectures to suit my own opinions,” he protests. “I make conjectures that fit the facts of my discoveries. And there are many written accounts that more than prove that hypothesis, which you would have known if you did more than skim my book.”

Creators, he is touchy about his work. “Why are you even asking me about vallaslin?”

“I just wanted to express . . . surprise that you still have yours.”

Ellana stops. “What the hell?”

He stops with her, confused. “It’s just a curiosity. You’re educated, you live beyond your clan, you’re aware of its true history – not to mention the painful memories associated with it. If I were you, I would have rid myself of it a long time ago. I just wonder why you haven’t.”

Wordless rage zips through her like the fuse on a stick of dynamite. Unable to begin to articulate everything wrong with that statement, she shakes her head and walks determinedly forward.

“I’ve offended you again.” Dr. Felassan’s long strides quickly catch up to hers. “I don’t understand how.”

A laugh burst from her like acid. “Of course, you don’t. You’re not Dalish.”

He blinks at her owlishly. “I don’t understand how that’s relevant. We’re elvhen. We share a history – one in which I’m more educated in. Why do our differences in modern heritage matter?”

“Because things change! So vallaslin used to be slave markings, so what? That was a thousand years ago. The culture has changed. The old meaning doesn’t matter in the face of its significance today. If you were Dalish you would understand that.”

It takes a herculean effort not to totally lose her shit on him, screaming and cussing and getting her shipped right the fuck back to Skyhold. Ellana would be proud of herself if she wasn’t shaking in suppressed rage.

He stares at her for a moment, and she can’t tell if he’s angry with her or not. Then he lowers his head for a moment. “I suppose it was too personal of a question. I overstepped my boundaries. I apologize.”

“Whatever,” she mutters and stalks off ahead of him before she totally loses all sense of self control.
and commits a homicide.

She avoids him like the plague for the next few days. Not even just because she’s still angry with
him. But it seems like he uses any time they are alone together as an opportunity to start a fight. Just
where the hell did Fen’Harrel even find this guy?

Days are spent clearing the wall on either side of the pin up models (as Ellana affectionately refers to
them) because she promised Harding she wouldn’t uncover the newest painting without her. Ellana
entertains herself by rifling through her Elvhen for ridiculous nicknames for the paintings.

During lunch breaks, Merrill photographs the first one from every angle and Dr. Felassan sketches it
in his notebook. Bram also takes closer looks at it on the ladder to see if Dr. Felassan’s camouflage
theory has any merit.

In the evenings she has Cole teach her how to crochet out of sheer boredom. *Hard in Hightown* is
the only book she brought with her and it’s been passed on from Bram to Harding like they’re in a
freaking book club.

Through it all she and Dr. Felassan barely exchange five words.

It’s on such an evening a couple of days after their fight, when she’s unraveling half an hour’s worth
of work after Cole noticed she had dropped a stitch four rows back, that Dr. Felassan approaches
her.

“Ellana.”

She looks up, bracing herself, ready for a storm. Strange – Dr. Fellasan has a similar look in his eyes,
like Ellana’s a horse that’s about to get violent. Of course, he wouldn’t have anything to worry about
if he would just keep his big fucking mouth shut.

But mixed in with the apprehension is a strange anticipation. Nobody tells you this, but most of the
time archeology is *boring*. Ellana clears square foot after square foot with almost nothing to show for
it, and these last couple of days waiting for Harding to come back so she can discover more of the
painting has been agony.

His shadow looms almost hesitantly across the couch. A small stack of books lay in his hands.

“I noticed you’ve run out of reading material. If you would like, you can borrow some of my books.”
He lips quirk in a rueful smile. “They’re not as entertaining as Varric’s, but if you would like more
history . . .”

Ellana sits up warily and takes the stack of books from his hands. They aren’t all books he’s written–
surprisingly, because he’s got that level of self-satisfied arrogance. What’s more surprising is the
variety of the stack: Dwarven Folktales both Famous and Forgotten; Never Saw it Coming –
historical accounts of Antiva’s most famous assassinations; Four Paws and a Medal of Honor – the
life and times of Ferelden’s most beloved Mabari warriors.

“All of these look really interesting,” she says, reading the short descriptions on the backs.

“You may borrow them all, then. I particularly recommend the Dwarven folk tales – they have
lovely illustrations.”

Gratitude sits awkwardly with her, but she gives Dr. Felassan her best smile. “Thank you. I
appreciate it.”
He bows his head in return. There’s something strange in his eyes – fondness, affection. Something warm that softens the planes of his face and makes him look almost approachable. But there’s no reason why such a look would be directed at her. It’s the kind of look Ellana catches on Varric’s face after he’s teased Cassandra and she’s stalked off in a huff – or on Krem after Iron Bull has made yet another pun joke on his name.

“Perhaps when you’re finished, we could discuss what you’ve read?”

Immediately Ellana’s hackles rise – a discussion with Dr. Felassan sounds like code for him to shove his opinions down her throat and expect her to agree with him. But the hope in his voice – hesitant and fragile – makes her reconsider. A real discussion – an equal exchange of ideas – Ellana loves nothing better.

“Sure.”

Ellana stays up later than she should have reading the folktales. Full of exploration, creation, adventure: they’re so different from the elven kind she grew up with. She enjoyed them so much, in fact, that she kind of looks forward to discussing them with Dr. Felassan the next morning.

“Which one is your favorite so far?” he asks as they head out for the day.

Ellana thinks a moment. “The Light Bringer.”

His eyebrows raise up. “That’s an interesting choice. It’s not a very happy tale.”

“That’s what I like about it. In Elvhen stories, light protects us, it represents joy and warmth and goodness. But to the dwarves, the light brings despair and ruin. The whole story is creepy as hell and I didn’t expect that.”

“Yes, it’s fascinating how an underground society would internalize the meaning of light. Of course, they have to use light to see by, but they don’t categorize that as light – just fire. Light for them represents the sun, which represents the outside –”

“And that represents the unknown,” Ellana adds. “A break in tradition. It’s why any dwarf that wanders to the surface comes back cursed and evil. The light bringer had to be purified in darkness. It’s the total inverse of Elvhen ideology.”

Dr. Felassan lights up in the exact way that Dorian does when Ellana understands a difficult concept. No matter how much field work he does, Dr. Felassan is definitely the teacher type.

“Exactly. Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never read anything like it. My library was . . . a little lacking in books like these.”

“The Dalish have little time for things outside their own traditions,” says Dr. Felassan, nodding. “A bit like the Dwarves, I suppose.”

Ellana swallows. As far as criticisms go, this one barely qualifies. It’s true. Her people have an obsession with their own traditions that she always found stifling.

“Which one’s your favorite?”

She changes the subject anyway.
“This one is even more glorious than the last one,” says Harding.

After three hours of backbreaking work, Harding and Ellana finally gaze upon the form of the second elf painting. The artists probably meant this creation to stand as the pinnacle of male physiology. Instead, it looks even more erotic than the first painting, squatting quite suggestively and looking coyly over his shoulder. Not even the shield and sword held aloft could counteract the ridiculous emphasis on this elf’s clenched ass cheeks.

“I agree,” says Ellana. “There is no way these aren’t pin up models. I mean, Antiva had a heavily homosexual army back in the third age.”

“These are not pin up models,” says Dr. Felassan, sounding a bit exasperated.

“Well, to be fair, we can’t definitively say they aren’t,” pipes up Bram. “Move a bit to your right, you’re cutting off part of the shield.”

As Merrill and Bram take more photographs and Cole wanders off to nap somewhere, Ellana tells Harding of the nicknames she’d been knocking around in her head.

“So, I want to name the tall one Ina’lan’ehn’y’mesilde which basically translates as ‘someone really hot who is horrible at sex.’”

Harding’s lips silently try to map out the syllables in the Elvhen name and ends up looking like a gasping fish. Ellana laughs.

“I’m sorry,” says Harding, laughing with her. “It’s a wonderful word. I just have no hope of saying it right.”

“That’s okay, it’s a bit of a mouthful anyway.”

“I know a word close to it, though.” Harding’s lips quirk in a devious smirk. “Fred.”

“Fred?”

“Yeah. My ex-boyfriend.”

Ellana throws her head back and laughs.

They end up naming the second one Sidela, the elvhen word for “naughty”. Sidela and Fred. It sounds like a sitcom.

Ellana works her way through the rest of the folktales and moves on to the Antivan Crow murders. Honestly, knowing that Dr. Felassan even has this book changes her opinion of him somewhat. It’s too grim and exciting to belong to someone so stuffy. Not to mention it’s written in a much more informal style than typical historical books. Ellana enjoys it immensely. She also finds herself enjoying the gleam in Dr. Felassan’s eye when she talks about it.

“I can’t believe that the murder of Queen Madrigal is still unsolved,” she says.

“It remains one of Antiva’s greatest mysteries. Indeed, though the Crows took credit for it, there’s little evidence to suggest they had anything to do with it.”
“I wonder if the captain had anything to do with it. I mean, he questioned the Crows and they would reveal anything, but that could just be something he made up to cover his tracks.”

“You’re also forgetting the letter from the Executors.”

“There’s no evidence they even exist. How easy would it have been to forge something like that for the captain to conveniently find?”

Dr. Felassan chuckles. “True. You might be onto something. Maybe you should contact the Antivan royal Embassy.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “Maybe I’ll just ask my Crow friend for insider knowledge instead.”

“You . . . have a friend who’s an Antivan Crow?”

“Well, he’s a former Crow.” Even though they’re out in the middle of nowhere, she still has the urge to look around for anyone who could report Zev. “He’s in witness protection right now. But I doubt he would know anything – he left at a young age and was raised in foster care.”

“And he’s at Skyhold? That’s an impressive leap.”

Ellana shrugs. “He’s a genius at computers and math. I’ve gotten a lot of tutoring from him, actually.”

They talk all the way to the ruins without pause, which shocks the hell out of her, honestly. Who knew that Dr. Felassan could be fun to talk to? She actually looked forward to lunch to continue their conversation, though she could blame that on the monotony of pulling down all these gods-damn vines.

But if she did, she’d be lying.

Saturday morning Ellana wakes up to suspicious quiet. No soft Merrill snores. No sounds of Cole talking softly to his nug friends. No coffee maker percolating. When Ellana looks down at the bottom bunk, it’s empty, the blankets smooth and corners tucked in.

The bright sunshine streaming through the kitchen window nearly blinds Ellana as she stumbles out of her room towards the coffee pot.

“Good morning.”

Ellana jumps and turns to Dr. Felassan, sitting at the dining table with a literary journal.

“Oh no,” she says. “If you’re already up, I must have slept in way too late.”

“It’s a little past eleven.” He sets down his journal. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve been staying up too late reading and it’s all caught up with me.”

Ellana pours herself a cup of the remaining coffee. At this hour of the morning, Bram should be singing as he makes breakfast, Cole should be napping on the couch as cartoons play on the television, Merrill should be dusting and humming like some kind of lost princess in a fairytale.

Instead it’s dead quiet with not a soul around except for Dr. Felassan.
“Where is everybody?” Ellana asks.

Dr. Felassan nods to the fridge, where there’s a note penned in Merrill’s flowy script attached with a magnet. “They went to run errands in town.”

“Oh.”

So that meant possible hours left alone with just Dr. Felassan for company. The idea left her somewhat uneasy, though she scolds herself for it. As if she should be afraid of anyone, much less some stuffy professor with a stick up his ass that only relaxes for books.

“There are some boiled eggs leftover on the counter and some cut up strawberries in the fridge, if you would like them. I have already eaten.”

Ellana is a little disappointed she couldn’t go into town – she wanted to get some postcards for Josephine and Krem. But she still has roughly half the book about Ferelden dog warriors to finish, so Ellana makes herself comfortable on the porch and dives back in.

A little while later Dr. Felassan steps out onto the porch with his laptop and takes up residence at the patio table.

“I’m not disturbing you, am I?” he asks.

“Nope.” Ellana doesn’t turn her gaze from the page.

They sit in that strangely companionable silence, too comfortable with each other’s presence than any two near strangers have to a right to, until they break for a late lunch. At nearly three in the afternoon, there is still no sign of their friends.

“How are you enjoying your book,” he asks, mixing in vinaigrette dressing in his salad while Ellana attacks a turkey sandwich.

“It’s a little startling to go from grisly Antivan murders to heartwarming stories about dogs, but I like it. Was this book written for children?”

Dr. Felassan nods. “Yes, but I often find children’s literature enjoyable after so many dry history books.”

“Don’t you write dry history books?” The joke pops out of her mouth before she can reconsider it.

He raises an eyebrow. “I write history books – but if you did anything more than skim it, you would know they aren’t dry.”

Ellana’s lip quirks up, a secret smile for herself. “Sure. Maybe one of these days I’ll get around to actually reading it.”

His eyes gleam knowingly, as if he’s in on this joke somehow, and hides how amusing he finds it. Her smile widens in return. It’s a rare moment of mutual understanding, of shared amusement.

Dr. Felassan looks away first, silent for a moment, as if bracing himself.

“Ellana, I have to admit . . . I am rather impressed by you,” he confesses.

Something strange swoops in her gut. “Why? I haven’t done anything.”

“On the contrary, you’ve accomplished much. It takes a lot of bravery to leave the comfort of your
home for a strange place full of strange people, and you did so completely on your own.”

“Lots of people leave home, Dr. Felassan,” she points out. “It’s not that special.”

“It is when you’re Dalish. The world is more hostile, your upbringing more isolated, yourself more ignorant of the world and its customs as a result. It’s a lot to overcome, and that’s not touching the fact that you managed to get into one of Orlais’ most prestigious universities with such a limited background education.”

Every word of his feels like acid poured into the pit of her stomach. The fact that he’s right makes it even worse. But if her discomfort shows, he doesn’t notice. Dr. Felassan carries on, oblivious.

“It’s obvious from our discussions that you’re intelligent, that you have a hunger for knowledge, for multiple perspectives, and it’s admirable how well you’ve cultivated that hunger despite coming from a culture that shuns knowledge and awareness of the world. It’s rare to see a Dalish want to leave tradition behind in the manner you have, much less to do so for the pursuit of knowledge and enrichment of oneself. Truly, you have much to be proud of.”

Anger is a surprisingly varied emotion. It comes in all kinds of different forms and intensities, and Ellana experienced them all, intimately, over the years. People always think that it’s the explosive anger that’s the most dangerous, the volcano kind that erupts without warning and rains damage before dying out.

They’re wrong. The worst kind of anger is the one that Ellana feels crackling under her skin, not the spontaneous eruption of a volcano. It’s the steady, doomed buildup of a storm, a slow, unstoppable gathering of power. The kind of anger that makes the pressure drop in the air. A hurricane anger that build and builds until it unleashes everything at once.

She feels very calm right now, though her heart thuds heavily in her chest.

“Yeah, I guess I never thought about it like that before.” Her voice is slow. Measured. Conversational even. “But when you put it like that, it really is amazing how an ignorant, backwoods, naïve Dalish savage could handle setting foot outside their front door. But getting into college? That really is a godsdamn miracle.”

It’s almost comical how quickly Dr. Felassan’s face changes from condescension to horror – the moment he realizes that he fucked up.

“Ellana, that’s not –”

“How fucking stupid do you think that I am?” She thunders, jerking to her feet fast enough to shake the table. “You’ve done nothing but insult me, my people, and my culture since I got here and you think you can play this off like I’m too oblivious to get what you’re implying? I am done playing this game. I’m done keeping my mouth shut while you disrespect my degree, my way of life, my intelligence. I don’t see you pulling this shit with Merrill, so what is your fucking deal with me?
He stares at her, his silence condemning this outburst of hers as nothing more than a tantrum.

She slams her hands down on the table. “Answer me!”

When he speaks, his voice comes out measured and controlled. “I made the simple mistake of thinking that you could look upon your own culture with objectivity, a balanced perspective, instead of blindly following the ideals of your Keeper without question.”

“Bullshit! You just wanted someone to validate your own fucking prejudice of my people, and you thought, without even knowing me, that I would be that person. Well you’ve got the whole rest of the fucking world to do that with you. I’m not joining them.”

“Why do you still defend a people that has abandoned and rejected you?” he shoots back. “Why can’t you see how that’s a product of the kind of blind loyalty that clouds your people’s judgement?”

Ellana blinks at him, horrified. “How the fuck do you know about that?”

Did Merrill blab to him? Did he somehow overhear their conversation before they got to the cabin? How long has he been sitting on this information, ready to pull it out like an ace in a game of Diamondback?

Dr. Felassan’s face, flushed in anger, suddenly goes white. “Because that’s generally what happens to any Dalish who defies the status quo. Are you telling me it’s not true for you?”

“It’s none of your fucking business if it’s true or not.”

“That’s all but a confirmation,” he snaps.

“So what! So what if they did? So what if my education wasn’t the best, so what if my people are obsessed with their own traditions, so what if they don’t care about the rest of the world? So the fuck what? You still don’t get to criticize it! You don’t get to say anything because you’re not. Fucking, Dalish.” By now she is screaming so loud that her voice goes hoarse. “You have no right to look down on any culture and criticize it from your place of academic privilege. You don’t know what it’s like to be hated, to be poor, to be driven out of your own homelands, to be murdered for not assimilating. So just do everyone a favor and just shut the fuck up.”

Dizzy and hoarse and so full of anger she feels like she could explode, Ellana knows she has utterly lost control of herself. She probably looks and sounds like a complete fucking lunatic, but she’s too far gone to care. In fact, if Dr. Felassan opens his smug fucking mouth for any reason other than to grovel, Ellana will probably deck him right here and now.

Shaking and feeling like a bomb that might go off at any moment, Ellana turns and walks away, right off the deck and into the woods, before she does anything more stupid.

The whole time Dr. Felassan watches her walk away and says nothing.

Ellana climbs up and over boulders and trees and hills until her arms shake with the effort to support herself. Then she collapses against the cliff face, angry tears streaming down her cheeks. Gods, she isn’t any different now than she was as a stupid, psychotic child. And just like that stupid, psychotic child, she’s too pissed to calm down.
For years she admired this man, and the way he lovingly detailed all aspects of a culture the rest of the world is content to forget. He lavished the kind of attention and praise on Ancient Elvhen that is usually reserved for the Chantry, and Ellana loved that. She felt noticed and valued by it.

She should have realized based on his subject matter that Dalish elves weren’t included in that. They’re never included. Just as much as the Dalish are content to live apart, Thedas is content to ignore them and anything they’ve ever contributed. Dr. Felassan probably thinks the Dalish just as savage as the rest of Thedas believes.

He was never on her side.

The light grows thicker and darker as evening sets in and Ellana does not move. What’s the point? She just essentially detonated a bomb back there – there can be nothing left to salvage. She will head back to the cabin, pack her bags, and be driven straight to the airport. Her stomach lurches at just the thought.

Typical. Ellana didn’t want to come here and now she doesn’t want to leave.

Just when she’s contemplating spending the night here, Cole finds her.

“How?” Ellana asks when his head peaks up over the rocks. “How the hell did you find me?”

“You left tracks.” He hops up and scoots beside her. “You were very angry.”

“Oh Creators,” Ellana groans, thinking of how Dr. Felassan could have spun their fight. “How bad is it?”

“I don’t understand.”

“How angry is everyone?”

He blinks owlishly at her. “Why would everyone be angry? This is between you and Solas.”

“So he didn’t . . . tell anyone what happened?”

“He told me because he can’t hide from me. But Bram and Merrill don’t know.”

Huh.

“Merrill wants you to come back for dinner. She’s worried you’ve fallen off a cliff or been eaten by a bear.”

“Alright.” Ellana sighs before gathering the willpower to stand up. “I’m coming.”

None of the forest looks familiar to her – she was too angry to notice what direction she barreled towards – but Cole leads through the trees as if this were his home. She keeps an eye out for the so-called tracks that led him to her and spots the occasional broken twig or half a footprint. He must have eyes like a hawk to track her through all this wilderness. Mihris was like that – sharp eyes that missed nothing. Cole reminds her of him in his quiet observance of people.

“How do you know Dr. Felassan,” she asks him after a while.

“He’s my guardian.”

Her eyebrows rise. “He adopted you?”
“Not officially, I’m too old. He found me one day and took me in. Now I help him.”

“Just like that?”

Cole hesitates, his face twisting into discomfort. “It’s more complicated. I just . . . don’t like to remember it.”

Ellana immediately feels ashamed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

“I just wanted to see how well you might know him. If you understand him any. Because I don’t. At all.”

The cicadas buzz in the evening light as Cole considers his answer. He takes so long that Ellana thinks perhaps he would just rather drop this whole thing.

“Solas is . . . Solas is like the ruins,” he says finally.

Ellana snorts. “Old and outdated?”

He shakes his head, taking her answer seriously. “You think you know the shape of him but there is so much hidden to be uncovered. So many secrets waiting for excavation. He hides in himself. But he is old, yes, in his soul.”

Well. That’s what you get for expecting a straight answer out of Cole. He could have been an oracle in another life, a speaker for the gods who talks exclusively in riddles and inferences. Ellana takes the hint and drops the subject.

It’s nearly dark by the time they show back up at the cabin. Ellana hadn’t realized how far she’d walked. Leftover pasta has been sorted into two Tupperware containers and left for Ellana and Cole. There is no sign of Dr. Felassan.

“Oh, thank the Creators,” Merrill says from the dining room table. “We’ve been back for over four hours! I was getting worried!”

“Sorry,” says Ellana. “I went out hiking and I just lost track of time.”

“You should be more careful,” Bram chides. “There are real bears out there, and I hear they have a particular taste for Dalish elf.”

Ellana rolls her eyes but smiles. “Thanks. I’ll take care of what’s left of the dishes.”

For the next few days she and Dr. Felassan play an interesting game. It’s a competition to see who can be the politest. At first it shocks her, when he pours her a to-go cup of coffee or offers her a water bottle during lunch. But then she quickly realizes that every considerate thing he does for her is a giant “fuck you.” It’s the ultimate passive aggressive power move. The more he responds to her crass display of anger and foul language, the worse off she looks and the guiltier it’s supposed to make her feel.

Well, head games don’t work on Ellana, so she responds in kind. Now, four days in, it’s almost a race to see who can prepare breakfast or hand out water or help with the cooler first.

Through it all, Dr. Felassan keeps his expressions to her a blank, inscrutable wall. He’s like a butler
from a movie: quiet, passionless, formal. It drives her crazy; she has never hated him more.

So when he grabs her wrist one evening after everyone else has filed inside the cabin to fight for the shower, she has to bite down the reflex to deck him in the face.

“Ellana – a moment first?” he asks.

His polite mask cracks and Ellana glimpses something dark behind it. She pulls her hand out of his loose grasp, the callouses of his fingers dragging against her skin.

“What?” She tries to sound neutral, polite even, but her heart pounds in her throat. Every time she’s alone with him, some horrible fight happens. She’s sick of it.

“I must apologize for my behavior, Ellana,” he begins. “I have been cruel to you – not intentionally, but intentions matter little when the end result is pain. The entire time you’ve stayed with us, I have been abominable. I’ve been . . . well, I’ve been a complete and utter ass.”

It’s the cuss word that makes it real. Honestly at this point, Ellana wouldn’t put it past Dr. Felassan to use some beautiful, elegant apology as a way to one up her and inspire an apology of her own. But she can’t imagine him ever using something as unrefined as “ass” if he were playing the game.

She almost wishes it were part of the game because she doesn’t know what to say right now. But Dr. Felassan continues, as if afraid of allowing her a reply.

“I would understand if you do not accept my apology and you are under no pressure to do so. However, if you do, meet me out here at three tomorrow morning. I would like to show you something.”

Ellana blinks. “I’m sorry, did you say three in the morning? Like, the middle of the night?”

“Yes.” He lowers his head. “It’s rather extraordinary and I think you will enjoy it. But it is not a daylight activity. You don’t have to accept or decline just now. I will know your answer tonight.”

“Um. Okay.”

Bram could have started a food fight during dinner and Ellana would not have noticed. Her mind whirls all evening. Is he sincere? Is he just messing with her? Would she be stupid to go? Would she be stupid not to go? What the hell does one do in the woods at three in the morning (that isn’t sex)? Can she hate him and still be curious enough to go?

In the end she sets her alarm for three in the morning – she will make her decision then, instead of agonizing over it all evening.

“Here. You’re going to need this.”

Dr. Felassan extends a thermos of fresh coffee and a flashlight. The noise of the coffee maker is what eventually propelled Ellana out of bed and made her decision. The act of preparing coffee (which was definitely not for him) was so hopeful and fragile that she knew she couldn’t disappoint him without feeling like a monster.

Though he quickly buries it, Ellana didn’t miss the way his eyes light up when he spotted her creeping out into the living room. Maybe Cole is right. Maybe there’s a lot of Dr. Felassan that hides underneath layers and layers of distant civility.
“Just so you know, I still reserve the right to be pissed at you,” she warns as she takes the thermos. “I’m just deeply curious about what’s out there.”

“I would expect no less,” he says, lips twitching as if he wants to smile.

A backpack sits on the counter. Dr. Felassan unzips various pockets for one last check while Ellana sips her coffee.

“Was I supposed to bring anything? A flashlight or something?”

He shakes his head. “Just yourself and your curiosity.”

“I have plenty of that.”

“Between that and the coffee there should be nothing stopping you.” He tucks his arms through the straps and looks at her expectantly.

“Shall we?”

Outside, the forest is a dark cacophony, a gaping maw ready to swallow them whole. The beam of the flashlight cuts through the darkness like an arrow, but it accomplishes little in the darkness of the new moon. Old ghost stories about Fen’Harel and murdered Dalish warriors out for revenge float from some forgotten corner of her mind just to torment her.

“How far away of a walk is this?” Ellana asks, swallowing her nerves.

“About an hour.” He gives her a sideways glance. “Don’t worry. It’s safe.”

“I’m not scared of the woods,” she says witheringly, and then nearly jumps out of her skin when she steps on a twig.

Ellana takes a long sip from her thermos and pointedly looks away from the hint of a smirk that plays on his mouth.

He walks ahead confident. His pale skin makes him look like a ghost, like the spirit of Fen’Harel leading her to her doom. Like Cole, he walks through the woods like he lives here, like he could navigate blindfolded (which they practically are in the darkness of the new moon). He must have walked this way several times in the darkness to know it so well. The night air is pleasantly cool and the clean, clear smell of it wakes her up faster than the coffee. Ellana is content to trail behind him.

After a while, though, the silence becomes unbearable.

“So, is this the part where you kill me and hide the body?”

Dr. Felassan laughs, a quiet, surprised huff. “No. I would have gone to the river for that. Or up a cliff.”

“True. Maybe you’re just a bad serial killer.”

“Or maybe you’re just my first victim.”

Ellana finds herself grinning. “So, do you just get revenge on all the people who fight with you?”

“If that were true, you would definitely not be my first victim.”

“Well, if you are out here to kill me, I’m not particularly worried.”
“No?”

“You’re not that much taller than me. I’m pretty sure I could take you on.”

“I’m sure you’re right. But I would not underestimate the strength of an archeologist. As you can see, most of the field work is just manual labor.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t expecting that.”

They reach a huge fallen tree, its side reaching to Ellana’s waist. Dr. Felassan hops nimbly up it and reaches out for her hand.

“The media aren’t concerned with true archeology, just the end results,” he says as he pulls her up. His hands are cool, even in the night air, his palms rough with his work. “And it’s nothing like Nevarra Jones. No one dives alone in underwater caves for treasure or finds secret temples on the tops of mountains, and certainly the fate of world does not rest in a single artifact.”

“You know, that’s a lot of specific details for someone who hates those kinds of movies.”

“Unfortunately, I have many friends who love them.”

“Like who?”

Dr. Felassan jumps down and Ellana follows.

“Varric is one.”

“You know, he probably only watches them to irritate you.”

“Yes, that idea had occurred to me.”

“You still watch them anyway?”

“He’s quite persuasive when he wants to be.”

It kind of blows Ellana’s mind that Dr. Felassan has this whole relationship with someone so involved in her life and yet she’s never heard a word about him until this trip. Of course, Varric is famous enough to know all kinds of people, but it’s strange to hear his name fall so easily out of Dr. Felassan’s mouth.

“So, what is way the hell out here that’s so exciting?”

“An adventure.”

“You’re really not going to tell me?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“A surprise jump off a cliff,” she mutters.

“It’s possible.” Amusement warms his tone. “It’s not far from here, but we can stop and rest if you need it.”

He stops near a low-level outcropping of rock, perfect for sitting on. Ellana gapes up at him.

“Rest? Are you fucking kidding me? Are you trying to insult me?”
A look of pale horror crosses his face, intensified by the faint glow of the flash light. Oh gods, he probably thinks she’s about to explode on him again. She’s seen that look on so many of her clansmen when she was a kid.

“I could be asking the same for you, hahren,” she adds, trying to diffuse the sudden tension that’s risen. “If one of us could use a rest, it’s not going to be the young Dalish who grew up in the woods.”

She smirks at him to show she’s not angry and he relaxes.

“Hahren? That’s quite a term of respect. I had no idea you felt that way about me.”

Ellana snorts. “You clearly haven’t been hearing it in its modern interpretation. If someone called my Keeper Hahren, she’d slap them. A hahren is one of those cranky old people who are set in their old ways and obsessed with complaining about anything that is different than their past experiences. You know, the shaking the cane and yelling out ‘Get off my lawn!’ kind of old people.”

“I’ve never been so flattered,” he says in such perfect deadpan that Ellana laughs. “But I have quite a ways before the old bones catch up with me, so shall we continue?”

The walk becomes decidedly more uphill after that until they reach the wall of a cliff, looming over them like the dark Veil in old fairytales.

Oh no. Please don’t tell me –

“Our destination lies above,” he says with disturbing cheer. “I’ve brought some rock climbing equipment with me, just a moment –”

“You cannot be fucking serious.”

He laughs, full bodied, and it transforms his face entirely. “No. I am not. There is a path around the corner.”

She glares at him. “You’re sadistic.”

“It is a little steep, mind you. You will have to be careful.”

The so-called path is only slightly less of a ninety-degree angle from herself, covered in loose rocks and dirt.

“That’s what you call a little steep?”

He blinks at her. “Are you telling me that a Dalish such as yourself couldn’t scale this?”

“Is that a challenge, old man?”

“I wouldn’t dare –”

Flashlight in her mouth, Ellana is already scrambling up the side of the path on all fours like some kind of bear. She is mindful not to kick down a lot of the gravel, but not overly delicate. Her only impediment is the laughter that escapes her mouth when she hears Dr. Felassan’s panicked scramble behind her.

She reaches the top first, but only barely. Ego or not, Ellana has to take a moment to catch her breath. Up on top of the cliff, there is nothing but flat rock as far as she can see – no trees or boulders obscure her view of the stars.
“I won,” she tells Dr. Felassan.

“You had a bit of a head start.” He sounds a bit breathless himself, but Ellana charitably doesn’t point this out.

“You have longer legs than me.”

“By about an inch. I would hardly consider than an advantage.” He slips off the backpack and rummages inside it before tossing her a water bottle.

“Thanks,” she says and chugs it rather ungracefully. Wiping water from her mouth, she gestures out at the black roiling landscape far below them. “So this surprise – is it the view? Because I have to say, nighttime is not the best opportunity.”

“It is the view, of a sort. Just not that one.”

He walks off to the left, his flashlight glinting off something metal and spherical that she somehow missed.

“What is that?”

Ellana watches in fascination as he putters around before resting his eyes against part of it.

“Perfect,” he announces, looking up. “This is an Astrarium. They are telescopes, created by an ancient Tevinter cult to guide their members to treasure caches or meeting places in secret via constellations.”

Ellana’s eyebrows raise. "I bet the Chantry loved that."

"They destroyed many of them over the years. I've been excavating this slowly over the last few weeks, oiling it and aligning it. This time of year, you can see the Equinor, and I've been waiting for the new moon to show you."

Ellana is hit with the sudden and uncomfortable realization that their passive aggressive Politeness Game might not have been a game at all. It might have been Dr. Felassan waiting for the right moment to apologize and offer her something unique and interesting as recompense. All this time Ellana has seethed and hated him while he worked in secret to give her this.

Not that he didn’t deserve it. He’s totally racist and classist and he always seemed so shocked that Ellana didn’t agree to slam her culture with him. But it’s also possible that he realized this and is trying to change.

The question remains on whether or not Ellana is up for the risk that he ruin it all again with one perfectly timed racist remark.

“Come, while I’ve got it perfectly lined up.”

Ellana walks over towards the Astrarium and places her eye against the small metal tube that flipped open on greased hinges.

There, perfectly square in her vision and zoomed in enough that it filled the whole of her vision was a familiar constellation. But never before has she seen in such perfect clarity. It almost takes her breath away, the sudden realization that she is looking at real stars, real suns burning light years away and she is nothing but a tiny speck on a tiny speck of a planet.
"It's beautiful," she whispers.

"I was hoping you would like it," he replies softly.

"What did you call this constellation? The Equus?"

"Equinor."

"Well that's not right. This is Hanal'ghilan," Ellana pulls away.

"Yes, it is," he says. "But Tevinter stole and adapted many of the constellations from ancient elven culture, including this one. I knew you would recognize it."

"Can you adjust it to see Ghilan'nain?" Ellana squints up at the sky, trying to locate it on her own. The Halla Goddess forever chased her favorite creation in the stars, trailing to the east close by.

"I think so." Dr. Felassan takes her place at the astrarium and spins it with slow, rusty squeals that make Ellana wince.

"... there. Try it now."

He takes a step to the side and Ellana leans in again. Ghilan'nain swims into vibrant focus, filling the scope of her vision. It feels like seeing an old friend.

"This one was always my favorite," she says.

"Your vallaslin namesake?"

"Yeah. When I was little I always thought she was up here having so much fun. I used to dream about going up into the sky and playing with her."

She can’t deny the apprehension that comes with sharing something personal about herself and her culture to him. It’s a test. If he uses this as another opportunity to say something wildly offensive she might very well push him off this fucking cliff.

"Truly there can be no doubt you received the right vallaslin."

"Yeah, my keeper is uncannily good about that. It’s like she’s a mind reader or something. Nothing gets past her."

"She raised you after your parents died, correct? She sounds like an incomparable woman."

"She is." A lump rises up in her throat and Ellana tries to swallow it down.

Dr. Felassan’s gaze softens. "You miss her a great deal."

"I – yeah."

She sighs heavily. Against her better judgement it pours out from her. “It’s been a little rough being back in the Dales. Every day I’m reminded of home – the way it looks, the smells, the sounds. I forgot how much I missed it. Ever since I left I only had one opportunity to come back and visit, and it was a disaster. And now home is just a two-hour drive from here and it might as well be in the freaking Anderfels for all that I could go.

A long silence follows her outburst before Dr. Felassan speaks.

"Is that why you were so angry those first few days? Because being in this place reignited your homesickness?"
Ellana almost laughs. “Oh gods, no. That’s a whole other mess.”

“How so?”

“It’s a weird story and I’m not entirely sure I can get into it,” she says.

“I meant no pressure. I only wish to understand you. I feel as if I have done nothing but misunderstand you the whole time we’ve known each other.”

Something tugs inside her and she bites her lip.

“My situation at college is, um, really unorthodox. If you’re going to hear about it, you can’t judge it.”

“I wouldn’t dare. We are on the top of a cliff, you know, and I’m sure you could find the way back alone.”

Ellana gives him half a smile. “So how did you know I was coming? Like, who did you talk to?”

“I didn’t talk to anyone. After Colette broke her leg, we asked Skyhold for any applicants, and yours was the only application we received.”

“. . . I had an application?”

Dr. Felassan blinks in surprise. “You . . . didn’t know?”

Fen’Harel, that sneaky son of a bitch. Ellana could kill him.

“Oh, that is it. Okay. Here’s the deal with me.”

She briefly explains her situation with Fen’Harel, trying (and failing) to make it sound more like an ordinary scholarship rather than some creepy set up with a mysterious stranger that could possibly fuck her over at any given moment. Dr. Felassan does not react in any way to the news, trying hard, as it appears, to not show any judgement or opinion whatsoever.

“You’re right,” he says when she’s finished. “It is a very unconventional situation. But it seems to be working well for you. I’m assuming, however, from your reaction earlier that you did not submit that application?”

“No. I didn’t.” She can’t help but sound bitter about it. It’s just one more way that Fen’Harel has taken control of her life.

He gives her a wary look. “Have you not enjoyed being here at all, then?”

Guilt stabs her. “No! I mean, I enjoy it a lot. It’s way more work than I was expecting, but I’ve missed nature and being in the woods, I’ve missed the Dales, I miss talking about my history. I’ve been at Skyhold for two years now and I’ve actually yet to see a class on just Elvhen history. Uncovering those paintings is probably the coolest thing I’ve ever done.”

“But part of you is angry.”

“It’s not directed at you or at being in this place, not really.” Ellana bites her lip. “My sophomore year was really rough – math and computer science do not come easy for me. I worked my ass off all year; I barely had any time to relax or do anything for myself. And after all that, instead of going to the beach in Antiva with my best friend and catching my breath for a moment, I’m shipped here to
bust my ass in the woods all summer. But really, the part that I hate is that I wasn’t asked. I was ordered. And now I know he went behind my back and submitted all this information without telling me. I just feel so . . .” she casts around for the right words.

“Patronized,” Dr. Felassan supplies, softly. “Patronized and disrespected.”

“Exactly. He’s treating me like a child who can’t make her own decisions. And maybe it was naïve of me to trust that he wouldn’t throw his weight around and use my debt to take control of my life, I know that. I was stupid.”

“You were not stupid,” he says. He looks almost angry. “You were not naïve. He’d been nothing but kind and understanding until that point and then he betrayed you. He deserves your anger.”

Ellana gives him a sad smile. “He holds so much over my head, it’s not like I could ever tell him.”

“I think you should. I think you should let nothing cower you or your spirit, no matter who it is.”

“Those are brave words coming from someone I’ve eviscerated more than once.”

“Then you should know how much I mean them.” His gaze is sharp, intense, and Ellana can’t hold it for long before looking away.

“We’ll see. Right now, I’m giving him the silent treatment. Maybe at the end of the summer, I’ll really let him have it.”

Dr. Felassan gives her a crooked smile. “All summer to build up your rage? That’s rather terrifying. You must tell me how it goes.”

“Maybe I’ll forward it to you, give you PTSD flashbacks.”

“I look forward to it.”

A flash of blue light interrupts the darkness as he checks the time on his watch. “We should get going if we want to make it back before the sun rises.”

Ellana gets to her feet and helps him pack up.

The walk back to the cabin is much quieter than the journey from it. Exhaustion steadily replaces the excitement and nerves that propelled her before and not even the last dregs of lukewarm coffee can give Ellana any energy. When they finally make it to the porch, Ellana sags against the railing. Dr. Felassan lingers beside her, his posture drooping like a wilted flower.

“I have to say, Dr. Felassan, this whole adventure was unexpectedly amazing. Thank you.”

He looks at her with a fondness that is starting to feel slightly less out of place now.

“It was my pleasure, Ellana. I . . . would like to use this as a chance to start over. Neither of us have put our best foot forward these last few weeks. Perhaps this evening can be our reboot.”

She considers this for a moment, then sticks her hand out. “My name is Ellana Lavellan. I love history, and I look forward to working here with you.”

He shakes her hand in a firm, cool grasp, their callouses pressing together. “My name is Dr. Solas Felassan, but please call me Solas. It will be a pleasure to have you here.”

Ellana grins. “I know we only just met, but I am beat. I’m going to sleep for roughly ten minutes
before getting up all over again.”

“I think I shall do the same. On nydha, Ellana.”

“On nydha, Solas.”

Chapter End Notes

For everyone still hanging around, I love you. Come talk to me on tumblr.

blarfkey.tumblr.com
It feels like someone took out all of the blood in Ellana’s body and replaced it with concrete. Her eyelashes stick together like magnets. It takes three attempts for Merrill to wake her up. Finally, with ten minutes to spare, Ellana stumbles out of the bedroom and makes a beeline straight for the coffee maker.

“Top of the morning, Ellana,” Bram says cheerfully from the kitchen table.

Ellana just grunts at him like an Avvar caveman. She pours herself a generous cup and starts taking as big of sips as she dares, ignoring the way it scalds her lips. No cream. No sugar. If she could inject the caffeine directly into her bloodstream, she would.

Solas emerges from his room and shuffles over towards Ellana. She takes one look at the dark circles under his eyes and pours him a mug.

“Here. You’re going to need this,” she says.

“Ma sarranas,” he murmurs, his voice hoarse and gravely and -- okay.

Ellana is much more awake now.

He closes his eyes, steeling himself, and then starts downing the coffee like a man lost in the desert. Afterward, his face pinches tight as if he had eaten a lemon, rind and all.

“Why do you drink coffee if you hate it so much?” she asks.

“Desperation.”

“Maybe if you put sugar in it, you’ll like it more.”

He shakes his head, eyes wide and solemn. “Nothing will ever make this tolerable. Ever.”

“O-kay. Well, I don’t know what traumatic event caused such strong feelings, but I’m sorry.”

His lips twitch into a hint of a smile.

Work that day is particularly grueling. Ellana is so exhausted she can hardly lift her hedge trimmers. She uncovers a pathetic square foot before lunch, which she can barely chew. Like a phone battery on one percent, her body is starting to shut down whether she wants it to or not. Usually every day Cole passes out for a cat nap during lunch, so she stumbles over to the soft patch of shaded grass and collapses beside him.
In minutes she is dead to the world.

When she wakes up again, Cole has put his hat over her face to block out the sun. Something warm leans against her arm. When she takes the hat off, she sees Solas sleeping beside her, head lolled close enough to her cheek that she can just barely feel his breath.

His eyelashes look like splashes of ink. The bruise of his broken nose has almost completely faded, his freckles resurfacing.

Slowly his eyes flutter open, like some kind of princess in a fairy tale. Ellana darts her gaze away before he thinks she does nothing but stare at him.

“See anything interesting?”

Busted. She turns her gaze back and looks at the slight bump in his nose. “Your nose is going to be crooked.”

“So is yours,” he counters. His lips twitch into his signature almost-smile. “I suppose we left our mark on each other.”

“Oi, you two,” calls Bram from under the canvass. “You going to sleep all day? What’s gotten into ya? You’re not getting sick, are you?”

“No, my friend.” Solas sits up. “Just trouble sleeping last night.”

There’s a pause while Bram looks quickly between the two of them before shaking his head. Ellana almost flushes at how it must look to him. “That’s not usually a problem for you, eh?”

Solas holds out his hand to Ellana and helps her to her feet with sure and easy strength.

“The stars were too bright last night,” Cole adds oh so helpfully.

For a moment Ellana and Solas freeze, eye to eye, hands still clasped together. Then he releases her, quickly and subtly, and steps away.

But as usual, Bram and Merrill give Cole a good-hearted smile and ignore his non-sequiturs

Rejuvenated by her nap, Ellana attacks the wall with enough vigor to hopefully throw off suspicion. She definitely knows the conclusions her clan would jump to if they saw her and Solas napping together because the night before exhausted them. It must be on his mind as well, because Solas doesn’t avoid her – that would definitely cause suspicion – so much as he keeps his standard polite distance. But after last night’s give and take that came so easily, as if they had been friends for years, it feels strange.

On the walk back to the cabin, Bram tries to teach her the lyrics of the drinking song he hummed this morning. His accent comes out thicker when he sings, a mess of syllables that jam into one another.

“I can’t understand you!” Merrill says, laughing. “He pit his airm aboot haer neck? A boot? A shoe around her neck?”

“No! Aboot – ach!” Bram laughs and takes a deep breath before slowing down. “About. He put his arm around her neck.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?”

“I did!”
Eventually Merrill realizes exactly what the song’s about and she goes red in the face and sputters.

“I can’t believe you were singing that! When we were making breakfast!”

“It’s an ancient drinking song,” says Bram with mock innocence. “What else would it be about? Surely the elves have some that are just as bawdy, eh Solas?”

“I am not an expert in that particular field,” Solas protests.

“The Dalish sing about trees and flowers and animals,” Merrill says. “Nice, happy things.”

“Ha!” Ellana cries so loud it nearly echoes around them. “Bullshit. I know a song that would make even the tips of Solas’s ears red.”

Bram’s eyes light up. “Let’s hear it, then! That would be quite an accomplishment.”

Her eyes dart over to Solas, who looks at her with one eyebrow raised as if to say Do your worst.

“It’s in Elvish,” she warns before launching into a merry tune that she, Danyla, and Mihris used to sing at the top of their lungs when hiking around the orchard, back when such acts made her feel rebellious and edgy, despite the complete lack of easily offended adults or children around them at the time.

Merrill’s eyes grow wider with every verse, and Solas’s eyebrows climb up his forehead. She keeps eye contact with him the longest as she sings her favorite part, where the two elves have sex next to a statue of Fen’Harel. The song ends with them cursed for their folly, in ways that are just as lewd as the act that brought about the curse.

Sure enough, there is a rosy glow climbing up the side of his neck, but nothing compares to Merrill, whose face shines bright as an ember.

“I admit, I’ve never heard that one before,” Solas admits.

“You want to help me translate it for our pal Bram?” She asks innocently.

“You will need to ply me with quite a bit of wine before that happens.” His lips quirk in that half smile of his.

“I’ll have to give you the gist of the story,” Ellana tells Bram. “I’m not so great at direct translating on the fly.”

Bram grins after she explains the lyrics to him. “Oh, we have a song like that! Only it’s a statue of Andraste instead of Fen’Harel, and my mother slapped me once for repeating it.”

“That sounds awesome and you should teach it to me.”

“Oh Creators,” Merrill mutters. “Cole, cover your ears!”

It’s been three weeks, and all that anyone has found are two paintings of dubious integrity. By now, Ellana, Cole, and Harding have uncovered a stretch of roughly two hundred feet of wall while Solas, Bram, and Merrill have sifted through about eight squared off sections.

Despite their progress there is still so much to do. There’s a second layer and parts of a third layer of arches completely overgrown on all the walls and vine covered lumps of fallen pieces scattered
around the area, not to mention all the soil layers still left for Bram, Solas, and Merrill to uncover inch by agonizing inch.

Ellana looks around on their lunch break and despairs.

“This is never to get done, is it?” she says.

“What do you mean?” Solas asks.

“I mean, look at everything.” She gestures hopelessly at the ruins, which still mostly resemble a jungle. “There’s only five of us. It’ll take years at this rate.”

“Well . . . yes. Of course it will. Did you think we would be done by summer’s end?”

“. . . yes,” Ellana admits, somewhat reluctantly.

Bram bursts into laughter. “If we had a bulldozer, maybe.”

“If we could even fit one through the entrance,” adds Solas.

Even Merrill smiles. “Harding would bury you both with it, I think.”

Bram leans closer to her and whispers conspiratorially. “What if I told you there’s a strong possibility that we might never finish it? That we would have to leave it behind, once the funding runs out?”

“What?” Ellana practically yelps.

“It’s true,” says Solas. “Our funding depends on what kind of artifacts we find here. If there isn’t a sufficient amount, the funding is cut and we move on. Sometimes architecture alone, as lovely as it can be, is not enough to justify the funding.”

“How can ruins be totally devoid of artifacts when people lived there?”

“Time. Time and the elements are a historian’s greatest enemy. Sometimes archeologists discover a ruin too late, after the world has destroyed all but the stone foundation.”

“I see pictures all the time of busted piles of rocks that used to be some kind of temple for Andraste or whatever.”

“The Chantry has deep pockets and a vested interest in anything related to its history,” says Bram.

“But elven ruins have to justify their existence by revealing some astounding artifacts while every rotting foundation of a Chantry house gets lovingly restored? That’s bullshit. No offense, Bram, but that is total fucking bullshit.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” he says. “I know it’s unfair. And also incredibly boring. I mean if you see one armless, busted Andraste statue, you’ve seen them all.”

“Don’t you specialize in Chantry history?”

“Early Chantry,” Bram says. “From the Navarran Accords and before. That’s when everything was rough and new and exciting. Once the religion spread and dominated Thedas, it became violent and messy and full of politics. I try to stay away from all that nonsense.”

“So what kind of artifacts would we need to find to make all this worth it?” she asks.
“More than sherds of pottery, I’ll tell you that,” adds Bram. “Weapon and armor fragments, pieces of cookware or furniture, that kind of thing.”

“The paintings alone give a lot of interest,” says Solas, “but anything that points to what kind of purpose this place had, where in history it falls.”

“Well it’s not looking very promising right now,” she says.

Solas gives her that half-smile. “Patience, Ellana. It will come.”

As if Solas had spoken some kind of magic spell, Bram uncovered something not two hours later.

“Andraste’s stars and garters, look at this!”

Everyone immediately abandons all pretense of work and rushes over to crouch next to Bram as his soft bristled brush swipes dirt away like an excited little bird.

Something dull and rectangular-ish with sharp edges emerges, nearly the same color as the dirt around it. It could fit in the palm of Ellana’s hand, and quite frankly, she is not impressed.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Bram says happily. “It could be anything – a piece of a sword, or tool, or armor. Part of a lock of some sort.”

“How will you ever find out?”

“You study it, of course. Compare it to other artifacts in the area, once we find more, or to artifacts found in similar cultures or time periods. That’s usually done at the university. We just collect them for now.”

Solas and Merrill abandon their section as soon as their squares are finished and concentrate more effort around Bram’s section. The excitement over Bram’s discovery zings through them like an electric current.

By the end of the day, Merrill reaches the stone bricks underneath. Even though no artifacts are discovered with it, everyone reacts with the same level of enthusiasm as Bram’s metal shard.

“Each layer is like a moment in time,” Solas explains as they head home. “Removing each layer is a bit like time travel. The fact that the floor is buried underneath so many layers of dirt means that the ruins are very old indeed. Now that we are closer to it, the discovery of more artifacts is much more likely.”

Ellana remains skeptical that stone bricks and metal shards actually mean anything, but she can’t help but be buoyed by the happiness of the others.

The next day Merrill finds a black, misshapen cylinder and all hell breaks loose. Everyone huddles around the folding table under the canopy as she gently cleans the dirt off with a bottle of water and a soft cloth. Then they all take turns passing it around and inspecting it.

“It’s heavy,” Cole says.
He drops it into Ellana’s hand, which sinks under the sudden weight.

“It’s metal of some sort,” Solas says. “Most likely an iron ore deposit.”

“It’s shaped a bit oddly for that,” Bram remarks. “Perhaps it’s scrap metal from a forge.”

Solas shakes his head. “It’s not burned.”

Ellana rolls it around in her hand as the rest continue to throw out their interpretations. The lump looks familiar in a way that nags at her, but it’s identity remains as elusive as an Elvhen word that sits in the tip of her tongue. It’s only when she flips it over and notices an indentation on the bottom, that it finally hits her.

“It’s part of a hammer,” she says. “Look, the bottom has a hole for the handle, which probably rotted away. But this end here is flatter and rounder than the other end, which makes it look like the kind one of my clansmen uses.”

Bram’s eyes light up. “Sweet Maker, I think you’re right! Do you know what this means?”

Solas smiles in response. “There was a forge here.”

“Which means the shard that Bram found could have been part of a weapon!”

Bram, Solas, and Merrill concentrate their efforts around the area of the discovery, while Ellana and Cole return to the wall. It’s hard not to be jealous of the others when the vines bore Ellana to tears and make her feel like she’s spinning her wheels, but she doesn’t have the training to comb through each soil layer so meticulously.

By the end of the day, Merrill’s discovery remained the only one, but the hike back home is anything but disappointed. Speculation of the ruin’s original purpose abounds, ranging from a garrison for Emerald Knight soldiers to some kind of marketplace or blacksmithing shop and everything in between. Even through his usual austerity, Ellana can sense the excitement in Solas.

“I’m surprised you’re this happy over something that’s not Arlathan-related,” she tells him.

He looks at her in surprise. “It’s still elven history, even if it is more recent than what I’m typically used to. But relics of Arlathan are difficult to find and scarce in number. If I were so exclusive, I would have very little work.”

“You could always go back to teaching until someone finds another site,” Ellana suggests.

“I suppose. I have been away for quite some time. But I find the ideal of teaching suits me better than the reality of it.”

“How so?”

Solas takes a moment to answer. “When one finds a like-minded student, teaching is wonderful. I enjoy watching other people learn, seeing their joy as they discover for the first time something I’ve known for years. It keeps alive my sense of wonder. Alas, most of the students I’ve encountered either did not appreciate history the way they should have or were in my class for last minute credit and the like. I’ve met very few students who share my love of history. You and Merrill are some of the only ones.”

“So, you like teaching so long as it fits into your ideal situation,” she clarifies.
“I suppose you could see it that way. I also miss being in the field, surrounded by actual history instead of just looking at photographs.”

“Now that I can understand.”

It becomes harder to leave the ruins after that. The temptation to stay longer, just five more minutes to sift through this last layer/get a head start for tomorrow/go back through the old dirt just to make sure they didn’t miss anything becomes hard to ignore even though the exhaustion. Not even a three day stretch of zero discoveries could dampen the excitement.

But a heat index of a hundred and two definitely will.

Dalish summers are always humid, but this day in particular dawns with fog that hangs thick as soup, and it only gets worse from there.

Ten minutes into the hike, everyone is drenched in sweat. You could drown by breathing too deeply. And of course, the sun burns through the canopy with vicious intent. When they reach the site, they all stand under the shaded canopy and chug water, bracing themselves for the work ahead.

For the first couple of hours, the misery level holds pretty steadily. But the closer it gets to noon and the higher the sun rises overhead, the worse it gets. The whole forest looks hazy, like something out of a dream, from the humidity.

Before lunch, Bram’s walkie talkie crackles to life, and Harding’s voice comes through.

“So, I just checked your cabin and none of you are there,” she says, sounding highly irritated. “Please tell me that you’re not at the site right now.”

“Ah . . . yes. Yes, we are. Is there a problem?”

“Yes, the problem is called a seventy-five-degree dew point and a heat index of a hundred and two! Get the hell out of there or you are all going have a heat stroke by the afternoon, and we can’t airlift you out of there.”

“You worry too much,” says Bram. “The trees provide excellent shade, and we’ve got plenty of water.”

The walkie is silent for a moment, and Ellana can imagine Harding taking a moment to compose herself. “The trees trap in humidity. Your body cannot cool off in high humidity. Ergo, heat stroke. This is the worst possible time to be working. Go home.”

Bram and Solas exchange a long look before Solas nods his head. “Aye,” Bram replies. “We’ll pack up. Thanks, Lady Harding.”

“Just trying to make sure you stay safe,” she says. “It looks bad on my record if any of you die.”

Ellana doesn’t hide the relief on her face as they pack up. As exciting as the site has become, she probably wouldn’t have made it until the evening without passing out. Judging from the looks on everybody else’s faces, they’re not too beat up about cutting the day short either.

The hike back to the cabin is quiet with their suffering. Ellana ponders on how she will spend the
unexpected day off – it’s too hot to hike or read on the porch. Really, all she wants to do is stand in front of the freezer with the door open and –

A glint of light catches her attention. It’s the river, sparkling at the edge of the horizon. And suddenly Ellana knows exactly what she’s going to do.

When they reach the front porch, Ellana slings off the backpack of supplies and dumps it by the door.

“I’m heading to the river,” she says. “Who wants to join me?”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful,” Merrill sighs, dropping the cooler. “Count me in.”

“Aren’t you going to change first?” Solas asks her.

She looks down at her mud-covered, sweat-drenched t-shirt and shorts. “Why?”

He raises an eyebrow. “No reason.”

They all end up following her to the river, even Solas, who brings up the rear after he dashed into the cabin for his book. Once the swing comes into view, Ellana rushes to the bank, toes her shoes off, and dives right in. Istie’s voice echoes in her head about the dangers of underwater branches, glass in the sand, water snakes, blah blah blah. But Ellana is too hot to care. The water feels luxurious, wrapping around her like cool silk, and she could happily drown herself rather than deal with the muggy, sticky air above for one more second.

Just when her burning lungs can’t take it anymore, Ellana breaks through the surface, gasping and feeling like a mermaid. She’s in the middle of the river now and just becoming aware of the shouting by the beach.

“Sweet Maker, woman, you swim like a fish,” Bram hollers. “We thought you were dead!”

“I could have gone all the way across the river when I was younger,” Ellana says. “It’s been a while since I’ve been able to swim.”

To prove her point, Ellana takes a deep breath and swims back to shore under the water. By the time she resurfaces, Merrill and Cole have already tugged their shoes off and are wading through the water, while Bram sits on a rock with his shoes off and pants rolled up. Solas has taken residence underneath a nearby tree and watches them with his book in his lap.

“You scared of the water, Bram?” Ellana asks. She crawls up to the rock, shallow water up to her chin, and splashes his leg.

“Oi! If I take these clothes off, this delicate skin will sizzle like Ferelden Fried Chicken,” he says. “I’m Starkhaven – the sun doesn’t exist up there.”

“Creators, Bram, have you never swam in your clothes before?” Ellana rolls her eyes. “And the Chantry says elves are the ones running wild and naked.”

“Wouldn’t they get . . . ” He stops abruptly.

“Dirty? Were you going to say dirty?”

“No. No I was not.” He kicks water at her face before sliding down the rock and landing next to her. Solas pointedly ignores all cries for him to join them. Ellana doesn’t know how he does it, sitting in
the heat like that, even if he is in the shade. They swim for a little while – Ellana and Bram do have a race, from the sandbar in the middle of the river to the other side and back (which he lost with good humor) – before their fun is punctured by a strange, primal sounding cry.

“What the –”

Ellana sees only an orange-tinted blur hurtling through the air on the rope swing – zinging close enough to her head that she felt the breeze as it passed – before it crashes into the river with a terrific splash. A few seconds later, Harding’s head pops up, her hair streaming behind her like an orange peel.

“I hoped you all would be here,” she says, spitting water out. “For a while I was worried I’d find your bodies passed out on the trail back to the cabin.”

“We didn’t dare question the Lady Harding’s orders,” says Bram.

Harding’s dramatic entrance inspires recreation. Ellana is the first to scramble up the tree, swing in hand, and jump off. The swing gets an astonishing amount of air, sending her catapulting halfway across the river before she lets go. Merrill frets for so long that Ellana ends up pushing her off the tree and Cole forgets that he has to let go at some point, so he swings back and forth like a pendulum until he slips into the water with the grace of an eel.

“You’re not going to get in on this?” Harding calls to Solas.

“Don’t bother with him,” Ellana says, loud enough for Solas to hear. “He’s got a medical condition.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s called stickupyourass. It’s very debilitating. It requires intense surgery, and some people never recover from it.”

Harding laughs, but Ellana keeps her gaze trained on Solas, who acts as if he didn’t hear her at all. Ah well. If he wants to die in a puddle of his own sweat then so be it. Creators forbid he relax and have a little fun.

She starts a splash fight with Cole, who just sits and takes it.

“Thank you. That felt nice,” he says.

“You’re supposed to splash me back,” Ellana explains. “It’s a splash fight.”

His eyes grow wide. “Oh!”

And then he cups his hands and sends a tidal wave that drenches her entire upper body.


Bram and Harding immediately team up, leaving Merrill to switch sides like the secret traitor she is whenever she thinks one team is losing too badly. Hiding behind Cole’s hat amid the onslaught of Harding’s attacks, she misses the swing fly past her until it hits the back of her head on its return.

A huge splash soaks everyone from behind. The spot under the tree is empty. Ellana searches for Solas and sees no sign of him.

Something grabs her ankle and yanks her down into the water. She barely has time to scream, kicking like a maniac and remembering all the river monster stories Aenor loved to tell. When she
resurfaces, Solas is blinking water from his eyes and smiling.

“That was surprisingly refreshing,” he says.

“Well I’ll be damned,” she says. “There is a cure for stickupyourass.”

“Yes. It’s cruel mockery.”

She smirks at him. “Whatever works, am I right?”

Solas stays in the river with them until the end. He even gets involved in their game of chicken, starting out as the referee, a role he takes with comic seriousness. Then Harding throws Ellana on her ass for the third time in a row.

“That is it!” she pushes her wet hair out of her face. “Solas, get over here. Let me get on your shoulders. No offense, Cole, but your shaky bird legs aren’t cutting it.”

“They would if you weren’t so heavy,” he protests.

“I’m going to pretend that I didn’t hear that.”

“Oi, that’s not fair!” Bram cries. “You can’t sit on Solas’s shoulders. The two of you together will be ten feet tall!”

“Well clearly Harding’s got some center of gravity advantage, so what’s fair about that?” Ellana shoots back. “Come on, Solas. I am going to take her down if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You are disturbingly competitive,” Bram remarks.

Solas just blinks at her. “Are you certain about this?”

“Yes! Quit clutching your pearls and get over here.”

He and Cole trade places. Ellana has him bend down in front of her while she climbs over his back like the most awkward, half-finished game of leap frog. She sways a bit as he slowly stands up, her hand scrambling for purchase on top of his smooth head, but his firm grip on her thighs steadies her.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs. “Quit squirming.”

Ellana swallows thickly and tries to be still. Despite his steady grip (or because of it) Harding still sends Ellana slipping backwards into the water. It hurts her pride, but Ellana concedes defeat.

“You’re a beast,” she says.

Harding beams. “Thank you.”

When they finally make it back to the cabin, the sun has nearly disappeared over the trees. Too exhausted to cook anything involved, Bram and Ellana scramble a bunch of eggs and stick some bacon in the oven for dinner. No one stays up, not even Cole, who has passed out on the couch with the T.V. on.

Even so, Ellana can’t get the sight of Solas’s wide, long-fingered hands wrapped around her thighs out of her head.
It storms all that night and by the next morning the world is soaking and drenched and bearable again. Mud covers everything, the trees drip on them like miniature rainstorms, and the site has seen better days. The uniform rectangles that Solas, Bram, and Merrill have worked on are all washed out.

It’s a veritable mud bath. Every vine that comes down brings a cascade of water and mud with it. Even Solas has given up on staying clean. But as the sun climbs higher, the site begins to dry out and reveal new treasures.

Around mid-afternoon, Solas finds what looks like a chipped, pointy rock. But Ellana had found enough old arrow heads in creek beds to recognize it instantly.

He rinses it carefully off in the small bucket of water beside him and holds it up while everyone crowds around him.

“Be careful where you step,” he cautions.

Three more were found in the same area in a matter of minutes. Apparently, the rain had washed out enough dirt to reveal them. It kickstarted Bram and Merrill to do their own squares with feverish excitement, and by the time they needed to pack up, several more arrow heads were found, along with a few more pottery sherds.

“To find so many clustered together implies that they were all being stored in one container,” Solas says on the walk back home. “Which further implies that this area could have been a military base of some kind for the Emerald Knights.”

“Holy shit.” To think at how she had scoffed at the site her first week there, thinking it nothing but a bunch of old stones.

“Of course, there isn’t enough evidence to prove that conjecture, but it’s a valid hypothesis.”

“What else could it be?” she asks.

“Any number of things. Perhaps it was a marketplace that had a fletcher’s stall. Perhaps it was some sort of trading post. It’s possible that the structure is older and the Knights coopted it to merely stash belongings they were never able to retrieve again.”

“That’s less cool than a military base,” Ellana points out.

“If one gets into archeology thinking that every site is as dramatic as the potential of this particular one, then one should look elsewhere for a career. Often it is very long, hard hours for very little repayment.”

“And then you stumble on a military base for the fucking Emerald Knights.”

He smiles at her. “And then you find a military base for the Emerald Knights.”

More discoveries turn up after that. Longer shards of blades; pottery pieces that still had faint traces of paint; curved, battered metal that could be parts of shields. Nothing domestic so far, so Solas holds the current consensus that the ruins are definitely militaristic.

Even so, Ellana has a hard time picturing it. Despite the new findings that accumulate on the tables every day, her mind can’t fill in the space of the ruins to envision it whole and bustling with activity. It still looks like an overgrown bunch of rocks to her.
“I don’t see it,” she tells Solas at lunch. He sketches with one hand the findings of the morning while eating with the other hand.

“See what?” He wipes away a few bread crumbs with his pinky finger.

Ellana waves a hand at the ruins. “You know, the fort or garrison or whatever this was supposed to be.”

Solas pauses at that and looks up at her. “Really? What do you see?”

“What’s already out here, I guess. I just see the leftovers, I can’t picture what it used to be.”

“Hmmm. That’s unfortunate.”

He goes back to his sketching and Ellana leaves him to it. Now that real progress is being made, Bram, Merrill, and even Cole have been sucked into categorizing, documenting, and organizing the finds. Ellana just worries about her section of the wall and leaves the rest to the professionals.

Though Ellana is a morning person by nature, she draws the line before sun-up. But that doesn’t stop her from waking up Saturday morning to Cole’s wide, unblinking stare.

She jerks back so hard she nearly hits her head on the wall. “Fenedhis!” she hisses. “Cole, what the fuck?”

“You have to see this,” he whispers urgently. “Hurry, before they leave.”

He rustles Merrill from her bed as well, and the two of them stumble after Cole to the back porch. He presses a finger to his lips before silently opening the door and ushering them outside.

Ellana’s breath catches.

Grazing between the trees a few yards away are a dozen halla. In the grey dawn, they look ethereal, like the spirits of Ghilan’nain who guide wayward Dalish back to their homes.

“Don’t make sudden movements or sounds,” Cole murmurs, his voice barely a whisper. “They will scatter if they’re scared.”

“I know.”

How many times had she sat on Istie’s porch with a cup of tea and watched them fade out of the trees? They were always hungry for Istie’s roses, and she woke Ellana up early to guard them. So used to their presence, the halla would walk up to Ellana and eat out of her hand. They used to follow Dany around, even the wild ones, like something out of a folk tale.

The memory of it rises sharp and sudden. Tears track down her cheeks before she even notices that she’s crying.

Merrill slips her hand inside of Ellana’s, her eyes bright.

“I’m sorry,” Ellana says, wiping her face. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You can only lock feelings away for so long before they come bursting out,” Merrill says.

The halla jerk their heads up at the sound of Ellana and Merrill’s voices, but they don’t run. Perhaps
“I don’t want to have feelings,” Ellana says. “I can never go back – there’s no point in missing any of it. I have to move on.”

Merrill gives her a sad smile. “That’s not how it works.”

More tears come – Ellana can’t wipe them away fast enough. “I’m so angry at them,” she says, “yet I still miss them, and I hate it. I hate feeling this way. I couldn’t wait to get out of there and now all I want to do is go back. It’s pathetic.”

Merrill’s hand rubs soothing circles on her back. “It’s not pathetic. It’s your identity. You can’t hide from who you are and what you love.”

“Well the alternative sucks. What’s the other option besides stuffing it all away to the back of your head or suffering all the time?”

“When you figure that out, you can tell me.”

“It’s like steam from a pot,” Cole says softly. He keeps his focus steadfastly on the Halla. “You have to let it out a little bit at a time. All at once will burn you, and keeping the lid on will make it explode.”

Hesitantly, he turns to her and places a hand on her upper arm. “There is more than one way to have a clan.”

With that he turns and leaves. Merrill and Ellana stay and watch the Halla until her tears are just an embarrassing memory.

“I’ve thought about what you said the other day.”

Ellana looks up from her sandwich to see Solas looming over her, his sketchbook in hand.

“I would like to show you something, if you’re up for it.”

“Only if I can take my sandwich with me.”

“I would never dream of parting the two of you.”

He takes her to the other side of the ruins and sits down in the shade, patting the spot beside him for Ellana to do the same.

“When I look at ruins,” he says, “the leftovers as you called them do nothing but guide me to see the fuller picture. Each artifact we uncover gives me more clues to see what kind of life was lived in these walls. But it takes time and training and much experience to see what I see, so I tried to sketch it out for you.”

He flips open the sketch book somewhere around the middle and hands it over to her.

The lines are loose and imprecise, but the picture of a busy fort could not be clearer. Ellana can barely recognize the structure of the walls around them underneath what Solas has added.

“The roof was probably made of thin layers of hide or canvas that sloped downwards, which would have rotted away long ago.” His finger traces the features as he points them out. “Based on the
locations of our findings, the forge was most likely situated here and built for basic repairs rather than serious weapons output.”

Sketched around the forge are two elves, one with a broken-tipped sword at his side, the other with his head thrown back.

“Is this elf . . . laughing?” she asks.

“Yes.” Solas lips quirks upwards. “I imagine the one on the left broke his sword fooling around.”

The more Ellana studies the picture, the more examples of life pop out at her. Three elves visit around a campfire – with one elf trying to sneak the leftover bread off the plate of the person next to him. Two elves argue with each other on a stone pathway that stretches through the middle of the compound. One elf sleeps, hidden between the arches, while several archers practice below him.

Solas walks her through it all, describing every sensation, from the sound of swords clanging in the practice yard, the smell of mutton roasting on the campfire to the taste of smoke in the air. In that moment, the ruins transformed around her, the rot and rubble falling away to reveal the life beneath them, as if she had stepped backwards in time.

“Banal’halam,” she murmurs.

A smile blooms slow and warm on his face. “Yes. Banal’halam.”

She turns her gaze back to him. “I wish I had the vision that you have.”

He bows his head. “Take Bram to any Chantry rubble, and he can do the same. With time and experience, the skill could be yours as well.”

“Maybe.” She doubts she will have that kind of time with her computer science job. Even so, she keeps the idea in the traitorous, hopeful part of her heart.

The wonder of that moment lingers within her. It gives her renewed purpose, and she looks around the ruins with fresh eyes, taking each crumbled corner and trying to imagine the people and activities that could happen there. She only has a month or so left to practice the kind of sight that Solas and Bram possess.

Only one thing trips her up, and that is the overgrown tree in the middle of the ruins. It’s small but feisty, clinging determinedly on top of a vine-covered mass of some sort.

“That tree wasn’t in your drawing,” she says to Solas at lunch.

“It’s merely vegetation that arrived after this place was abandoned. It didn’t need to be included.”

“It’s sprouting on top of something, and it’s in a pretty prominent spot. It could be something important.”

“It nothing more than a piece of rubble that has fallen and become overgrown. I would forget about it for now.”

Ellana tries to follow his advice, but the thing nags at her. There are other fallen pieces of rubble covered in vines – a whole spire sits somewhere near the left exit – but none of them are quite shaped like this one. The only architecture around them are rounded arches and spires and nothing that looks
like the indistinct blob under the tree.

After a couple of days, she gets tired of wondering and investigates it herself, sandwich in one hand and hedge trimmers in the other. Let Solas make fun of her if it turns out to be nothing, but at least she will silence the voice in her head.

“You’re wasting your time, you know.”

Solas hovers, and she doesn’t have to see his face to feel the smugness that radiates from it.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” she says, studying the vegetation for any signs of Royal Elfroot or other rare plants that Harding would have her hide for. All she can see are just more of the vines that cover everything else around here.

“You might want to stand back,” she warns, before cramming the rest of her sandwich in her mouth and hefting her trimmers.

“I remember the optimism of my freshman days as an archeologist. But not everything is significant. I also had to learn that the hard way.”

She ignores him, her mouth too full of sandwich to offer a retort anyway, and focuses on the task at hand. It takes a while, but eventually she starts uncovering glimpses of dark stone underneath the layers of dirt she brushes off with her hands.

That’s all she has time for before lunch ends and she returns to her section of the wall. But she returns every day for the rest of the week, slowly hacking away a strange protrusion in between two roots. By the weekend, Ellana has uncovered enough of the stone to suspect that it’s carved. It curves back and to the left in too gentle a slope to be natural. And above the slope, she discovers a perfectly round hole, as wide as her hand, packed with dirt.

“Whatever the hell this is, it’s definitely not natural.

She digs the dirt out of the hole with her fingers. It’s perfectly sloped like a bowl, and the ridge of rock that runs above it –

Instinct drives Ellana to cut away the section a few hand-spans across from the first hole, only to find a matching hole and smooth ridge above it. The rock curves down towards herself on either side of the holes.

They’re eye sockets.

This is a face.

She scrabbles to dig out the bottom half, digging in with her fingernails, until she uncovers a long, wide snout, like a dog’s.

This isn’t – no. No way. Oh Creators, if her instinct is correct, she is going to spend the rest of the summer rubbing it in Solas’ face.

She conquers the cheeks next and the wide ruff of stone fur that juts out past the eyes. And then the forehead, pushing spindly tree branches out of her way to reach the top. Bram hollers at her that lunch is over, but Ellana ignores it. On either side of the spindly roots lies two mounds, almost imperceptible underneath the layers of dirt and vegetation. The left one she uncovers with her bare hands, pulling out vines with a ferocity that she has never felt before.
It's a worn, rounded triangle.

“Solas!” she hollers, pulse roaring in her ears. “You need to see this!”

He arrives just as she’s scooping dirt out of the inside of the ear.

“It’s a snout!” she shows him what she uncovers. “And these are the eyes, and this is an ear.”

His face betrays nothing – no eye-rolling, no humility at being wrong. He neither confirms nor denies her – he just stares.

“I think it’s a dog,” Ellana says, eyeing his blank face with some trepidation. “The Emerald Knights had war dogs.”

“No,” he says quietly. “It’s a wolf.” He steps up beside her to draw his fingers reverently down the snout.

“Not – not the Wolf?” she says, hardly daring to hope.

“Yes.” He turns to her and she realizes the blankness of his expression is just shock. “This is a statue of Fen’Harel.”

“I thought . . . I thought those kinds of statues were outside of Dalish camps,” she says slowly. “To keep the Dread Wolf at bay. And this one –”

“Lies in the middle, in a place of importance,” Solas finishes.

“Why would any Dalish do that?”

“Exactly.”

It’s almost too insane to believe. And yet, despite the shock and wonder that courses through her system, she still finds the ability to nudge Solas with her elbow.

“Some worthless, broken piece of wall, am I right?”

Chapter End Notes

ma sarannas -- thank you

fenedhis -- wolf penis. I personally consider it the Elvhen equivalent of "motherfucker"

banal’halam -- a word without a true translation in English. Meaning the concept of souls and memories travelling onward throughout history within the minds and hearts of loved ones, thus meaning that everything -- in a small way -- is immortal. Buildings will remain, clues will remain of lost cultures, dead loved ones live onward in our memories. Nothing truly ends.

All Elvhen comes from fenxshiral and Bioware.

I have done my best to research everyday archaeology, but I know there are some definite gaps. If anyone spots something inaccurate, don't hesitate to tell me! I want to get this right. Or at least mostly right.
The Summer After Sophomore Year -- The Emerald Graves

Chapter Notes

So my job and my personal life has gotten pretty chaotic here in the last couple of months. I wanted to finish up the Emerald Graves this chapter, but I still have a nice chunk still left to write and no time to write it. So I figured I would post what I have so no one is waiting another two months for an update.

Thanks for sticking by me, even though it's been like two months (oops)! We'll have an extra long update next time to make up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harding brings an arborist with her when she inspects the statue. He takes a five second look at the tree and summarily dismisses it as a standard oak, roughly fifty years old – an infant in comparison to the trees around them.

“We’ll get a team out here and haul that thing off ASAP.” Harding tells them. “That should clear away a lot the dirt once that root system is gone.”

“I intend to supervise,” say Solas. “The roots have cut into the stone in some places – it will take delicate work to extract it.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “First it was some worthless piece rubble and now all of a sudden it’s precious cargo.”

He gives her a sideways glare. “Are you ever going to let that go?”

“No.”

It takes Harding’s team about two days to tear the tree down. Solas insists that they leave the bits of roots entwined close to the stone for him extract personally. Even without the tree, the statue is still covered in mounds of dirt and grass and vines. Now an expert, Ellana splits her time between the wall with Cole and de-vining the statue.

Often she bumps elbows with Solas, because of course the second he found out about it, he had to muscle in on her discovery.

“Back off, Solas. He’s mine.” she had said when he first wandered over with his tools. “You said he was insignificant vegetation! I’m not letting you steal all the discovery from me.”

Solas levels her with an exasperated stare. “Trust me, there is plenty of work for the two of us. You will not want for discovery.”

“You wouldn’t even draw him in your picture. You don’t deserve to discover any part of him. You’re not worthy.”

His eyebrows raise up. “Oh? Are you Fen’Harel’s most trusted ally now?”

“Shh!” Ellana’s gaze darts meaningfully over to Merrill, who is thankfully talking to Bram. “We
can’t call him that. He’s a *guard dog*, okay?” She puts air quotes around guard dog.

“Judging from his size and the prominent position within the camp, I doubt very seriously that the Emerald Knights took the time to construct a statue of their pet.”

“Yeah, but Merrill can’t sleep at night if she thinks it’s the Dread Wolf, so it’s a sweet, protective, and pure guard dog. Got it?”

“Don’t tell me she still believes in that superstitious nonsense. She’s well educated – she should know better.”

Ellana glares at him. “Don’t you dare get on your high and mighty historical horse about it. It’s hard to let go of deeply ingrained cultural fears, okay?”

He puts his hands up in a sign of surrender. “I wouldn’t dare; I respect Merrill too much. I’m just surprised, that’s all. Now, if I promise to immortalize this . . . guard dog into a painting worthy of his glory, would you allow me to assist you in uncovering him?”

“Oh, you have a serious offer.”

“When am I not serious?” Solas looks at her with a wide-eyed sincerity that she doesn’t believe for a second.

“Then we’ll shake on it,” she says.

Solas holds out his hand and she shakes her head. “You have to spit or it’s not a real promise.”

He stares at her for a moment. “Is that a serious suggestion?”

Ellana’s solemn expression does not crack. “When am I not serious?”

She hasn’t done a spit swap since she was ten years old, but Ellana wants to see if he’d really do it. He seems willing to try anything to prove himself to her after those weeks of feuding, and she can’t help but test him.

Just when she thinks there’s no way prim and proper Solas would ever stoop to such barbaric, hillbilly behavior, he spits delicately into his hand and holds it out, his eyes a challenge.

Oh merciful Creators. Grinning wildly, Ellana spits in her own grimy hand and they exchange handshakes.

“We have a deal,” she says.

To his credit, Solas does not immediately douse his hand in rubbing alcohol. Instead, he just wipes his palm on his muddy jeans and begins working beside her.

They work in tandem in a companionable silence that Ellana never thought possible a couple of weeks ago.

“Have you let go of such fears?” he asks after a while.

It takes Ellana a moment to recall their earlier conversation. “Of the Dread Wolf? I didn’t really have that one, to be honest.”

“Didn’t you grow up with your Keeper? It used to be part of their job to protect their clans from Fen’Harel.”
“I mean, everyone’s afraid of Fen’Harel when they’re little. But when my parents died, it was like . . . my worst fear already happened so what was Fen’Harel going to do? Besides, Falon’Din and his creepy-ass brother are way scarier than Fen’Harel. I actually started believing that the Dread Wolf was the only thing that could protect me from them, since he had no fear or respect for any of the Creators.”

“I suppose in a strange way, that makes logical sense,” he says.

“Actually, for about three or four years after my parents died, I had the same nightmare over and over again that Falon’Din stalked me, waiting to snatch me up because I was supposed to have been with my parents when they died and he was pissed that he didn’t get me. Istie had a stuffed dog made for me, and I named him Fen’Harel.” She offers him a half-hearted smirk. “So in a way I guess you could say I’ve slept with the Dread Wolf.”

Solas swallows and fixes his gaze on the chisel in his hand. “So you grew up believing that Fen’Harel protected you.”

“I guess,” Ellana shrugs. “if only with the mentality that being friends with the worst monster means that all the other monsters don’t bother you.”

“You have a very unique perspective of Fen’Harel. I’ve never met someone who views him in such a way.”

Ellana fights the urge to roll her eyes. “Then you haven’t looked hard enough. Not many people are superstitious like Merrill anymore. Fen’Harel is mostly a joke now.”

For a long moment, Solas does not respond, focused on slowly prying away one of the stubborn roots from the rock. “You’re probably right,” he says after a while. “But I think you underestimate how rare of a person you are. There are few people like you, Ellana. At least, in my humble experience.”

She ducks her head down and hides a smile.

Even working together, it takes Solas and Ellana nearly three weeks to uncover the Fen’Harel statue. Not only is the statue well buried underneath layers of plants, dirt, and rocks, but the ongoing rain slows them down. The month of Solis in the Dales means a miserable pattern of humidity building into a sudden burst that drives them under the canopy until it subsides. Usually Solas and Bram and Merrill would review the day’s findings so far, or sketch, or write notes, but there is nothing for Ellana to do but watch the rain and wait.

It doesn’t take long before Ellana gets sick of that, so the next time she feels the patter of rain, she keeps scraping dirt off the front paws with her trowel and ignores the calls of her field mates. Even though the trees block most of the rain, she’s soaked in a matter of minutes, but it feels good after such a muggy morning.

Something is dropped on her head, her face suddenly shielded from the rain. Ellana cranes her head up to look past the rim of Cole’s ridiculous sun hat. Cole stands beside her, the rain soaking his bangs and making him look like an old sheepdog.

“You’re getting wet,” he says. “You could catch cold.”

Even though rain doesn’t actually make people sick, Ellana offers him a smile. “Thanks. But now you’re getting wet.”
He shrugs. “I like the rain. It’s soothing.”

After that, whenever the rain would start up, Cole wordlessly gives Ellana his hat. Sometimes he stays and helps, sometimes he naps under the canopy, lulled by the rhythm of the storm. Solas offers to bring his umbrella, but Ellana politely declines and Cole looks offended at the very idea.

Despite her best efforts, it’s difficult to work with the statue and not think of her own Fen’Harel. She hasn’t even looked at her email all summer, even though the cabin has internet. She doesn’t know what would be worse – a scathing reply or no reply at all? Either way, she can’t bear to look.

But ever since their night at the Astrarium, Solas’s words have rattled in her head.

*I think you should let nothing cower you or your spirit, no matter who it is.*

Well that’s easy for him to say – he’s not going to suffer any repercussions. Yet he had fiercely encouraged her to confront Fen’Harel with all the wrath within her, despite knowing how it feels to be on the receiving end of it.

If someone as level-headed as Solas thinks she should confront him, then Ellana can’t help but think it might not be such a stupid idea.

Except, by now she doesn’t know exactly what she would say to him. Is she still pissed that none of this was arranged with her permission? Oh yeah. But she can’t say she would still rather be lounging on the beach with Josephine, not anymore. How do you explain to someone that they still fucked up when everything worked out for the best? And does Ellana still have the right to be angry when she’s happier here than she would have been in Antiva?

It might help if she had a face she could speak to instead of the cold anonymity of words on a page, even if it was through Abelas. As it stands, she knows a grand total of three definitive facts about Fen’Harel:

1. He identifies as male
2. He’s rich as hell
3. He’s college educated.

Everything else is up for debate; Abelas never confirmed that his client is even elvhen, despite using an elfish moniker. Hell, Fen’Harel could be Abelas himself, a thought that has definitely crossed her mind more than once. What a plot twist that would be.

But even though they use similar vocabulary, there’s a distance to Abelas that does not match up with Fen’Harel’s warm responses.

“What do you think Fen’Harel looks like?” she blurts out.

“It’s hard to say,” Solas replies easily. “There are several effigies of him, but most of them show his wolf form. The few elvhen portraits show a bald man, despite his culture’s preference for long hair.”


The chisel slips from his grip, scraping down the stone and making them both wince and the sound. “Sorry,” he says. “Why are you asking?”
Ellana shrugs, keeping her focus on the section before her. “I don’t know. I keep thinking about what I might say to him when the summer is over, but it’s hard to imagine a conversation with a faceless . . . entity. Sometimes he doesn’t even feel like a person.”

“Hmm.” Solas remains quiet for a long moment. He probably thinks she’s weird as hell for even bringing this up. “I suppose some baseless speculation could be a fun thought experiment. Do you think he’s young or old?”

“Old,” Ellana says immediately.

Solas’s eyebrows rise. “You didn’t even hesitate.”

“He’s definitely old. He’s got that classic old people attitude where he thinks all his experiences mean he knows better than everyone all the time and he’s never wrong.”

Solas chuckles. “Okay. So he’s old. Is he also short and bald?”

Ellana shakes her head. “No, he’s got too much confidence for that. He’s tall and he probably slicks his hair back like those old movie stars.”

“And how do you think Fen’Harel dresses?”

She looks over at his sweat stained t-shirt and jeans streaked with mud and waves her hand at them. “The opposite of that.”

Solas rolls his eyes. “These are my field clothes, Ellana. They aren’t a part of my actual wardrobe. You don’t wear those clothes out in public, do you?”

Right now, Ellana is wearing the same worn flannel with the sleeves pushed up and tank top that she danced in the club with Zevran in. “No comment.”

“Are you serious?”

“Anyway. Fen’Harel is disgustingly wealthy, so he can afford to dress classy. Slacks and sweaters and cardigans with the elbow patches. That kind of stuff.”

“He sounds like a fusty old professor.”

“He probably is one, since he values the college experience so damn much.”

“Hmmm. Tall, movie star hair, snappy dresser. He sounds like quite the distinguished gentleman. How long do you think he’s been married?”

“He’s not married.” Ellana doesn’t have to think about that one either.


“I don’t know why. I just know that if he had someone, he wouldn’t be paying over sixty thousand sovs a year for a pen-pal.”

“You think he’s lonely.” Solas’s voice has gone pensive.

“Incredibly. You would too if you ever met his lawyer. If that were my only friend, I’d pick up strangers in a library too.”

She bites her lip, pausing in her work. Look past the money and education and the fancy vocabulary,
and all she sees is someone desperate for a connection. It’s the only thing she can think of that would motivate such an insane commitment. Even pity will run out well before her four years are up.

But the more she thinks about how desperately lonely Fen’Harel must be, the more guilty she feels for not talking to him all summer, and the more pissed she gets because he doesn’t deserve her guilt. Not yet.

“For someone who has never met him, you seem to know him well,” Solas points out.

Ellana shakes her head. “Not really. I’ve just realized that the image I’m seeing in my head of him is suspiciously close to Istie’s favorite movie star from, like, forty years ago.”

“Ah.” Solas gives her a half smile. “Back to the drawing board then?”

“Yeah. Maybe he’s some sad, fat old dwarf with nothing better to do.”

“That’s not a very kind way to talk about Varric.”

Early into lunch everyone but Ellana and Solas sneak off into the forest. It takes a moment to notice, as Solas is showing Ellana a new sketch of the fort, this time with the wolf statue prominently displayed in the middle. It’s not as detailed as his earlier drawing, but it’s still intriguing how he sketched one of the knights laying down an offering before the statue.

Ellana checks around for Merrill, wanting to ask a question about Fen’Harel, and notices that the rest of the camp is empty.

“Um. Solas? Where the hell did everyone go?”

He looks around the site, eyebrows furrowed. “I have no idea. Perhaps Harding went to show them some of the wildlife?”

“What the hell, I want to see wildlife! If they get to see that bear she’s been talking about, I’m going to be pissed.”

“I highly doubt she would exclude you on such an adventure. Perhaps she is showing Bram and Cole some of the dangerous plants to watch out for and Merrill is simply helping.”

“Maybe. At least this means we can talk about the Fen’Harel statue without having to whisper. I think I have a theory.”

“Oh?” His eyes light up. “And what may that be?”

“I mean, I don’t have anything to back it up, but I think because the Emerald Knights were technically rebelling against the Chantry, they might have wanted Fen’Harel’s blessing as a god of rebellion.”

“That would put them at odds with the accepted mythology of their culture. By the time the Emerald Knights formed, Fen’Harel was already villainized in Dalish religion. The Knights made offerings to Elgar’nan for vengeance instead.”

Though his words belie an argument, it almost sounds routine, like he has to say it for the sake of it.

“It might not have been all Emerald Knights. It might have just been this group. And maybe the asking for vengeance started happening after the Knights started getting their asses kicked, but they
asked for rebellion first.”

“That idea has some merit. It would be hard to prove, however, without some kind of primary
document.”

“Yeah, good luck. The Dalish didn’t write much down. But I figured when the Chantry started
becoming a real threat, it would make some desperate enough to turn to Fen’Harel, even if they
didn’t trust him.”

“It’s a good theory,” says Solas. “I’ve been harboring a similar one.”

“Yeah?” Ellana smiles. It’s nice to see them both on the same page for once.

Before he can get into any further details, their missing field mates show back up, laden with various . . . flower crowns?

“Happy Diala’blur!” Merrill says brightly. She takes ones of the crowns made daisies and drops it on
Ellana’s head. “We don’t have any halla to decorate, but we do have one of Ghilan’nain’s chosen, so
close enough.”

“Are you serious?” Ellana says, but a grin steals across her face as each one of her companions
bestows flower crowns and bracelets and necklaces on her.

“Merrill told us all about this holiday,” Bram says. “It sounds absolutely charming. Too bad there’s
no street to parade you down, eh, Ellana?”

“Like a true halla, I would dropkick anyone who tried.”

“You know, I think there’s some halla down at the animal rescue farm near my house,” says
Harding. “We should totally go over there Saturday and beautify them!”

“If they’re wild halla, you won’t be able to get near them without getting your face smashed,” Ellana
warns.

“I know there’s at least one who couldn’t return back to the wild and now she’s in the petting zoo
part. She at least could use a makeover.”

Ellana wears two of the necklaces and three of the flower crowns until Solas had to chase off too
many curious, wandering bees. But she carries them all lovingly to their cabin and hangs them
around the bunk bed.

Patte de Chance Animal Rescue is an hour drive from the cabin. Everyone squeezes into Solas’s
sedan, Bram taking up the front passenger seat and Merrill, Ellana, and Cole in the back. The trip to
the rescue farm has a vaguely jaunty family vacation vibe. Bram sings show tunes and points out
funny license plates and Solas makes sure that everyone goes to the bathroom at the rest stop and
stops for snacks at a gas station.

Harding greets them at the gate when they arrive, having arrived shortly before they did. The elf who
runs the place stands with a slight stoop, his hair white as the halla he keeps and thin on top. He
greets Harding with a warm hug and firm handshakes for the rest of them.

“This is Tom,” Harding introduces. “He and I go way back.”
“She’s been volunteering since she was this big,” Tom adds, holding his hand just above his knees. His voice carries that light Orlesian accent Ellana heard so much in her apartment building she almost feels homesick for it. “I used to have to hold her up so she could brush the horses.”

“But I didn’t need a stool to milk the cow.” Harding’s cheek dimples with her smile. “Anyway, Gloria is in a paddock over here. She is ready for her makeover.”

“Been looking forward to it all week,” says Tom, limping alongside them. “I’ve seen a couple of Diala’blar celebrations – one of my aunts was Dalish – but I’ve never had the pleasure of participating.”

Gloria has three legs and one eye, her fur patchy with deep scarring on one side.

“I found her hit by a truck a few years ago,” Tom says. The moment he leans against the fence of the paddock, Gloria trots over, nuzzling his pocket in search of something. Tom fishes out a strawberry and feeds it to her. “She was barely out of fawnhood. I couldn’t save her leg or her eye, but the rest of her made it out alright.”

Dany would cry if she saw this.

“She’s beautiful,” Ellana says. “Do you have an electric razor?”

“Of course. It’s in a bag in the barn. Lacey told me a few days ago some of the things you would need. You can have your pick of flowers in the fields, as well.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Ellana can see Harding cringe at the name, ensuring that Ellana will never forget it until she dies.

Tom takes them on a tour of the farm before they get started. Several animals are permanent fixtures, including a hawk that flew up to Tom’s arm and gave Ellana a death glare. The barn is the last stop. The paddock behind it was surrounded by a high fence and the door locked with a steel bar and thick padlock. What the hell was in here, a wolf?

“This is where Maferath lives,” Tom says, fishing a key from his pocket. “He’s an escape artist, so we have to take several precautions.”

He opens the door and motions them inward. Immediately Cole gasps and Ellana takes a step back.

“What the hell is that?”

It looks like an unholy cross between a nug and a hippopotamus. Its hide looks almost black in the dim light, and giant horns curl upwards from behind its ears. It lumbers over to Tom, stomping its creepy hand-feet impatiently.

“You’ve never seen nuggalope before?” Tom asks, laughing.

“A what?”

“They’re endangered and very rare,” he explains. “They live in the mountains somewhere by the Free Marches. Maferath was illegally smuggled and stuck in some rich bastard’s chateau starving to death. The police raided it about ten years ago and had me nurse him back to health. They didn’t really know what to do with him – he couldn’t be rehabilitated and sent back to the wild – so they left him here and we’ve been stuck together ever since.”

Throughout this explanation, Maferath nudges Tom’s shoulder with increasing impatience until he
nearly knocks Tom into the door behind them.

“Andraste’s garters, would you stop that!” Tom shoves Maferath’s head away. “He’s got his knickers in a twist because we missed our morning walk preparing for Gloria. I’ll have to take him out while you are gathering flowers or else he’ll escape again.”

“Again?” Solas asks.

“Oh yeah, that’s why I have the locks and the fences. Left alone and hungry so much at that bastards’ house, he’s learned to use his feet and mouth to break into or break out of just about anything. He’s a regular crook. If he gets tired of waiting for me, he’ll go out on his own.”

Maferath lows mournfully as they leave, despite Tom’s assurances that he’ll be back in just a moment.

The farm stretches out for acres beyond the paddocks, the rolling hills and thickets of trees looking like a painting from the Orlesian Romantic period. They spread out and search for wildflowers, long grasses, bendy sticks, or anything else that could be decorative. Ellana also picks some wild spindle weed from around the pond as a snack for Gloria.

Not long into their quest a dark blur shoots past Ellana, followed by Tom hollering a blue streak and throwing his hat on the ground.

“Get back here you son of a bitch!”

Maferath bounds through the field, clocking in at a speed rather impressive for such a rotund creature. Reveling in his freedom, he ignores all attempts to get his attention and makes a beeline towards the trees.

Tom takes off after him, but stops, winded, beside Ellana.

“Goddamn it,” he mutters. “He’s going towards Diana’s place. If she catches him eating her cabbages one more time, she’s likely to shoot him.”

“What!”

Tom waves a hand dismissively. “She’s only got a BB gun and his hide’s so thick, he’ll barely feel it, but I’ll have to listen to her carrying on for the next week.”

“How do we get him back?”

“Wait till he tires himself out, I suppose.”

“Do you have a horse or something?” Ellana asks. “I could take someone with me and ride out and find him before he gets to that farm.”

“Ginger’s old and she won’t run for nothing. But . . .” Tom looks her up and down. “You’re Dalish, so this might be a stupid question, but have you ever ridden a hart?”

A wide grin spreads slowly across Ellana’s face. “A few times.”

Ellana could have saddled a hart in her sleep she’d done it so often at Dany’s ranch. It takes her less
time to ready George, a jumpy hart in one of the pastures, than it does to get back up to the barn.

Solas looks up at the hart and the impatient way he stamps his hooves while Ellana buckles the straps with deep discomfort. Ellana hides a smirk as she tightens the strap. Creators know why, but she loves seeing him rattled; people with his level of self-importance need shaken up or they get utterly unbearable.

She climbs up into the saddle and looks down at Solas expectantly. George shakes his great, antlered head, impatient to get moving, and Solas takes a nervous step back. She can feel the tension underneath her legs, the deep need to run.

“Hop up, Solas. We don’t have all day.”

His jaw tightens for a moment and then he climbs up behind her, nearly falling on the other side. His hands grip her waist for a moment to regain his balance before he snatches them back.

“My apologies,” he murmurs.

“Have you ever ridden anything before?” she asks.

“One of my cousins used to show horses,” he replies, taking a step back as George shakes his great, antlered head. “I would take them for walks occasionally.”

“Well this isn’t going to be a breezy trot around the paddock, so you better hold on.”

Ellana taps her feet on George’s sides and he shoots out of the barn door like a bullet. Immediately Solas’s hands scramble around her waist, white knuckled, as he almost gets unseated with the force of their movement.

George heads straight towards the trees with almost no guidance at all, which tells Ellana that either he and Maferath are buddies, or George also has some jail break tendencies. He has one speed – breakneck -- but Ellana doesn’t mind. It’s been so long since she’s ridden a hart, and she’s forgotten how much she loves the exhilaration, the wind in her face, feeling tall and invincible.

Judging from the death grip he has around her waist, Solas does not share in her happiness. His chest presses right against her back, so close she can feel his deep, quick breaths, his forehead resting against her shoulder blade. It’s a little distracting, if she’s honest – he has never touched her outside of a brief helping hand, or when he cleaned the blood off her face.

In no time at all George skids to a halt deep in the woods, where Maferath lumbers around, ripping off huge boughs of rashvine and devouring them. George makes an immediate beeline towards Maferath and wastes no time joining his buddy for the feast. Ellana has a feeling that both of her assumptions are correct.

“This must be their stash,” she says. “I bet they break out and come here and just stuff themselves.”

Solas relaxes his grip a little, his breathing evening out.

“It’s a shame we can’t bring them to the site – they would clear those walls in a week flat.”

His voice reverberates right beside her ear, the closeness of it making her jolt internally.

“Then I’d be out of a job,” she says.

“Oh, don’t worry – there’s always digging and sorting and sketching and sifting and a hundred other
tasks for you. I'll keep your hands very busy.”

Ellana swallows, her mind taking his innocent comment and twisting it into something wildly inappropriate.

“So do you think you can handle good ol’ George here by yourself?” she asks.

“You’re not planning on riding the nuggalope alone, are you?”

“Of course I am. How else are we getting him back? That’s why I brought you along,”

“But he has no saddle.”

“He’s got big-ass horns and he loves to be ridden. I’ll be alright.”

Solas casts a doubtful look over at Maferath. As fun as it is to see him unsettled, it might have been a mistake to take him. Visions of George bolting through the trees and taking Solas’s head off a low hanging branch or jumping over a creek and dumping Solas into the water flash through her mind.

“You sure you’re going to be alright?” Ellana turns her head to look at him.

His rolls his eyes. “I’ve ridden animals before. They may not be this . . . boisterous, but it’s not going to kill me.”

“You just jinxed yourself.”

His lips quirk up. “You better get astride Maferath, before he takes off again.”

Even with her long legs it’s hard to sit comfortably on a mount as wide as Maferath. Now that he’s got his rider, Maferath is happy to wait patiently as she settles in, unbothered by her grip in his curled horns. Her legs look like a child’s as they dangle barely to the middle of his torso.

She keeps him at an easy, steady pace that George matches quite happily. Solas keeps a tight grip on the reigns, but otherwise seems fine. Though her legs ache with the stretch, riding a nuggalope is a smoother ride than she expected. It’s a shame they’re endangered – Dany and her grandmother would get a huge kick of riding one themselves.

It’s harder and harder to keep thoughts of her clan away, especially here. Each time her mind conjures them it’s like a stab to the gut, and yet she can’t stop it. It sucks, but she misses them. Even though they hate her guts, even though she’s so unbelievably pissed at them, even so -- she craves their presence. She had no idea how much space in her identity they took up until it became empty. And Creators know she loves her Skyhold family, but they do not fill the void left behind.

By the time the setting sun paints the land around in a warm glow, Gloria looks, well . . . glorious. Wildflowers and red-stemmed vines wrap around her horns, the mark of Ghilan’nain shaved into the sides of her lustrous hide. Wreaths of embrium and crystal grace are placed around her neck and over her head like a crown. Through it all Gloria stands or sits with infinite patience, helped along by the copious amounts of hay and spindleweed and sugar cubes that she devours from Cole’s hand.

They end up with an overabundance of pickings, so both George and Maferath are festooned with the leftover vines and flowers. Surprisingly, after their jaunt through the wilderness, they allow this decorating with quiet dignity.
“I don’t think Gloria has looked this good in her life.” Tom says, as they snap photos of the finished result with their phones. “What comes after this?”

“We usually sing a song for Ghilan’nain and parade them down the street,” says Merrill. “People bring drums and bells and such and play music.”

“I don’t sing,” Ellana interjects before anyone gets any ideas.

“And then there’s a contest to see who has the most beautiful halla. Afterward there are food and craft vendors and live music.”

“Well, we’re a little short on vendors and live music,” says Harding, “but we could head back to your cabin and have a bonfire.”

Ellana immediately jumps on that idea, as does Merrill. Dalish and bonfires go together like whiskey and chaser and she misses them. They parade Gloria, George, and Maferath around the barn, posing them for photos, though this didn’t last long before the animals started eating each other’s decorations.

After they thanked Tom and said their goodbyes, Harding and Bram head into town for supplies while the rest of them head back for the cabin. Cole helps her look for firewood while Merrill and Solas clean out the fire pit.

Despite the rain, the woods are full of decent firewood; Ellana and Cole can barely carry their gatherings to the freshly swept fire pit. It’s been a long time since Ellana had to build her own fire, and it takes a few tries, but eventually she gets it roaring right as Harding and Bram pull into the driveway.

In addition to sausages and marshmallows, Harding also brought hamburgers and fries from one of the fast food joints, so no one goes hungry.

“So I had a question about your statue,” Harding asks as they dig in. “If it could be the Dread Wolf, then why does he only have two eyes?”

“It’s because he’s a guard dog,” interjects Merrill.

Bram grins. “How many eyes do you expect a wolf to have, Harding?”

Harding shoves his shoulder. “Well according to legend, the Dread Wolf has six.”

“That legend is nothing but hysterical human nonsense,” says Solas, voice dripping with distain. “It has nothing to do with Dalish traditions or historical fact.”

“Actually, the southern Dalish elves helped that legend along quite a bit,” says Ellana.

Bram looks between the three of them, mystified. “Human nonsense? Are you saying humans have their own version of Fen’Harel?”

“In a way,” says Solas. “Rather, they stole the moniker of the Dread Wolf and fashioned their own doomsday legend from it.”

“Really?” Bram’s eyes go wide in the firelight. “What does it do?”

“The whole thing is ridiculous, but supposedly many decades ago a few humans sighted a large wolf in the woods at night with six glowing eyes. A few days later, a fire broke out and burned most of
the town to the ground, so everyone believed that the wolf sighting not only caused the fire, but that it was an omen from the Dalish themselves as part of their curse for the town being on Dalish property.”

Harding bursts out laughing. “Where on Thedas did you hear that version?”

“It’s been several years since I heard it last, so some parts maybe inaccurate,” Solas admits.

“Some parts?” Ellana says. “Try, like, all of it. First of all, the town was on the border of the Dales, so it had both Dalish elves, non-Dalish elves, and humans all living together—”

“Yeah, the ones who witnessed the first sighting of the Dread Wolf,” Harding interjects, “were actually a Dalish couple and their human friend.”

“And it didn’t cause a fire. The dam broke from a nearby lake the next day and flooded the whole town. It killed like forty people. Only one of the Dalish witnesses survived, and he blamed the wolf that he saw and said it was the Dread Wolf.”

“After that there were multiple other sightings and they all happened within a few days of some minor disaster,” Harding says. “One of them was a fire, but nothing was as bad as the flood.”

“So how does that differ from the Dalish version?” Bram asks.

“Historically speaking,” says Solas, “Fen’Harel means “dread wolf” in Elvhen and it was a name given to him by his enemies. Though they said it in mockery, Fen’Harel embraced the moniker and used it for his rebellion, which eventually lead to the invasion of the Tevinter army and the destruction of Arlathan. The so-called Dread Wolf of recent legend is seen as a figure entirely separate from Fen’Harel.”

“It’s essentially a cryptid,” Ellana says. “I’ve heard all kinds of stories about it. Some people say he’s the evil familiar owned by Fen’Harel that sets curses on people, or that it’s a wolf mutated by radiation poisoning, or that he’s some kind of spirit that tries to warn people of impending disaster and he was sighted all over the place before Arlathan got invaded.”

“The Dread Wolf is big outside the Dales too,” adds Harding. “I’ve had to chase people from the park after dark trying to film sightings of him, and he’s the star of the Festival Unknown that gets put on every year about in Ponte Joli. People parade around in Dread Wolf masks and sell art and have creepy hayrides where people in costume jump out at you.”

“That is the silliest thing I have ever heard,” says Solas.

“It’s really fun, actually. I used to go every year when I was little.”

“I went once in high school,” Ellana says. “It is pretty fun. I still have my mask in a drawer somewhere.”

“My great-grandmother was haunted by Fen’Harel,” Merrill pipes up. She hugs her knees and stares into the fire. “There was an old statue of his outside of town – it was overgrown and neglected and she knocked it over with her car on accident. For weeks she had nightmares of a great wolf following her, and when she went outside she could feel something watching her, following her. The trees around her house started getting great long gouges in the trunks. Huge paw prints would show up at the edge of her porch. Finally she located the statue and set it back up and only then did everything stop.”

Silence reigns for a long moment after her story.
“Okay, I have to admit that is some creepy shit,” Ellana says.

“My grandmother was chased by a monster,” says Bram brightly. “They call him the Greyman. It’s over seven feet tall with grey fur all over its body, and haunts the moorlands outside the city. My gran swore it chased her car one night when she was visiting her sister. Nearly scared the religion right out of her. We also have a man-eating horse that lives in the Minater River named Minnie. She crawls out of the river at night, and if you try to ride her she drags you into the depths and eats you alive.”

The conversation devolves after that into paranormal encounters and ghost stories. Starkhaven is full of ghost stories about people dying in moorlands or drowning in the river, and of course there are a thousand Dalish ghost stories about Emerald Knights and curses and warring clans.

“As enthusiastic as elvhen lore can be for the supernatural, I find dwarven legends to be the most unsettling,” says Solas.

“I don’t know about that,” says Harding. “I’ve been more freaked out by Dalish spirits out for revenge in these creepy woods than any story my grandmother told me.”

“The stories I know are quite old,” says Solas. “How about I tell you one and you tell me if you’ve heard of it before.”

“Alright. Let’s hear it.”

Solas takes a moment to compose himself before he starts.

“Once long ago a poor dwarven brick layer overhead a rich dwarf from a merchant class discuss an expedition into the deep roads. He begged to be allowed to go, for the artifacts found in ancient thaigs could provide an income that would last the rest of his life. The merchant, amused at the dwarf’s ambition, told the brick layer that he could join for fifty sovereigns, which would go towards expenses. The servant sold his most of his belongings to raise the money. When he delivered it to the merchant, he was told to raise another fifty sovereigns for unexpected expenses.

“After selling his house, the brick layer returned with the fifty sovereigns and was told again that he needed a final payment of fifty sovereigns or he could not go. The dwarf was destitute at the point and told the merchant he had nothing but the clothes on his back and his family’s priceless heirloom, an artifact of his Paragon and passed down for fifteen generations. The merchant told the dwarf he would take it as the final payment and the dwarf agreed, thinking he could possibly buy it back after the expedition.

“The expedition went on as planned. The brick layer discovered an ancient thaig and reported his excitedly findings to the merchant. However, after the doors were unsealed, the dwarves discovered nothing but time battered ruins within the thaig. Disgusted, the merchant left, but the brick layer stayed behind to get one last look of history when he happened to see something glitter in the rubble. He pulled from the ruins a gold and gem encrusted statue, no bigger than his hand, and showed it to the merchant. The merchant congratulated him, but that night the brick layer overheard the merchant’s plan to murder him and take the statue for himself.

“The brick layer made a plan of his own. The next morning, he led the merchant back to the ruins where he discovered the statue and convinced the merchant that he saw something else glittering in the dim lamplight. As a show of gratitude, the brick layer told the merchant that he would give the discovery to the him. The merchant eagerly entered the room, but could see nothing. The brick layer told the dwarf to keep looking further in the room, he was sure that he saw something valuable. Each time the merchant expressed doubt, the brick layer assured him.
“Finally the merchant gave up and returned to the entrance, only to see it walled up with rubble so tightly packed together that it would not budge. He yelled for help, and the brick layer, on the other side of the wall, replied that he could not because of the merchant’s plans to kill him. The merchant promised that no harm would come to the brick layer, but it was not enough. The brick layer requested that all his expenses be refunded and the merchant promised this to him but it was not enough. ‘I would do anything for you if you were to spare my life’ the merchant pleaded. ‘Then perish’ said the brick layer and walked away.

“Of course, several hundred years later Makareth was built up on the ruins and its citizens will tell you of a voice that can be heard on quiet nights of the merchant screaming and begging to the empty air.”

“I have to admit, I’ve never heard that one,” says Harding. “And I’m thankful for it.”

“It’s an Orzamarr tale, rarely spread outside the kingdom,” says Solas.

The thought of being sealed alive in a tiny room to suffocate in the dark makes Ellana shudder. But as creepy as the dwarf tale is, the most unsettling story comes from Cole.

“Once there was a little boy who could do strange things,” he begins, voice quiet. “He could summon birds with a song, command fire with a whisper, move stones with twirl of his finger. He never used these tricks for harm, but people feared him anyway. They locked him away at the top of a tower, with no light save for a sliver of the noonday sun.”

He tosses a stick in the fire. “Eventually they forgot about him and he died in the dark, in agony, begging for death. His spirit could not move on; it walks in the shadows, seeing the light but never finding it. Dark and desperate, he seeks those who cry for death and gives them mercy. Though they would catch a glimpse of him in the hallways, the living forget his presence as soon as they turn their heads. In the morning, they find nothing but a pale corpse in the cells and no trace of a killer.”

Ellana stares at him after he finishes. The crickets chirp around them, a constant cacophony. Suddenly she doesn’t want to be out here surrounded by the dark, open maw of the woods.

“It’s getting late,” she says, “and the fire is getting low. I’m turning in.”

“Me too,” says Merrill immediately. “Harding, are you okay heading home in the dark? We have a spare room.”

Remembering all the creepy stories of people getting chased by wild creatures in their cars, Ellana does not envy Harding the drive home.

“You know what, I think I’ll take that spare room,” Harding says.

Ellana douses the fire with sand once everyone heads to the porch and then ducks inside the house so she’s not the last one left outside. She and Merrill say reluctant goodnights while Bram gets Harding settled in the fourth bedroom that Cole never uses for some reason.

Usually the sound of the crickets and cicadas lulls Ellana to right to sleep. Sometimes when she closes her eyes and focuses on the noise, she can almost convince herself that she’s a teenager back at Istie’s house. But tonight, every creak, every snap of twig or wind rustling through the trees jerks her awake, thoughts of murdered elves and curses and escaped convicts and ghost lights fly through her mind.

Sleep is impossible.
“Merrill,” she whispers, leaning her head over the edge of the bunk bed. “Are you asleep?”

“No.” Merrill’s voice sounds huffy. “And I don’t think I will be anytime soon.”

“Can I . . .” Ellana hesitates. Merrill’s Dalish, so it’s not like this would be a weird request, but they also haven’t known each other very long. “Can I come down there with you? Just for a little bit?”

“Yes, please,” Merrill says, relieved. “I’m scared out of my wits!”

Ellana crawls out of her bunk and into the cocoon of blankets that Merrill has made for her and swiftly covers their heads. She hasn’t done something like this since she and Dany stayed up all night and watched old horror movies when they were thirteen, but she’s too freaked out to feel childish. Merrill’s warm presence beside her is comforting proof that she’s not alone in the dark, like that godsdamn creepy serial killer ghost Cole told them about.

“I am never telling ghost stories again,” Merrill whispers. “Every time the wind blows I think I hear the Dread Wolf howling.”

“I can’t get that story Cole told us out of my head,” says Ellana. “Fucking Creators, who’ve thought something like that would have come out of someone like him?”

They lay in silence for a moment, but the silence is full of creepy noises outside.

“This may sound silly, but I kind of want to sleep with the light on,” says Merrill. “It’s getting stuffy in here.”

“Me too. But who’s getting up to turn it on?”

“I’m against the wall, so it has to be you.”

“I’m not getting up, that’s for damn sure.”

“Maybe we can get up together?”

“To flip one light switch?”

Merrill giggles and presses her forehead against Ellana’s shoulder. “Listen to how pathetic we sound!”

“You know what I think? I think we should make a run for it and hang out in the living room with Cole. Maybe find some cartoons on TV.”

“Alright. On the count of three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

Neither of them say three. Instead Ellana shoots out from under the covers and heads for the door, Merrill close on their heels. She wrenches the door open so hard it nearly slams into the wall and the blessed light from the living room pours in. Cole jerks from his spot at the kitchen table, his yarn needles clacking together.

“Sorry,” she says, a little sheepishly. “We were just . . .”

“Bored,” Merrill supplies.
“Yup. Bored. Can’t sleep.”

Cole holds up his nug sweater. “Do you want to knit with me?”

They stay up till one in the morning knitting tiny blankets for rescued nugs. Apparently, Tom has sourced some work from Cole for his farm. Merrill can complete a passable row of stitches, but Ellana is a mess. But at least picking out her dropped stitches distracts her mind from other thoughts. By the time they head back to their room, Ellana and Merrill are too exhausted to care about the noises outside.

Even so, they sleep with the door cracked and crammed together in Merrill’s bunk.

Chapter End Notes

So I went to the mothman festival this year for the first time, despite being from West Virginia and living here full time for the last ten years, haha. It gave me the awesome thought of Fen'Harel getting his own kind of modern urban legend and festival. Even though I don't believe in mothman, the ride home in the dark definitely had me a little freaked, lol.

And if anyone is interested, I posted the first chapter of my Solas/Cadash fic that I've been working on off and on for the last year and a half. Any feedback would be awesome, because this is such a rare ship, lol.

Diala'blar -- the holiday for Ghilan'nain where the hall are celebrated and adored.
The following Friday, Ellana wakes up to sunlight beaming past the curtain and directly into her face, which means she’s overslept by at least an hour. She jerks up so fast she nearly hits her head on the ceiling.

“Merrill!”

Did the alarm break? Did they forget to set it? Why wouldn’t anyone else wake them up? Is something wrong?

Merrill’s bunk is empty.

As Ellana creeps down the ladder, she hears muffled laughter coming from behind the closed door. Was that Harding?

For a moment she wonders if she’s having an intensely vivid dream, but when she opens the door and steps into the living room, everyone jumps from behind the couch and yells “Happy Birthday!”

It scares the ever-living shit out of her.

“Fucking Creators!” she yells and jumps back, knocking into the dining room table.

“Careful, there, you’ll knock over your birthday pancakes,” says Bram. “I made them with fresh blueberries.”

Ellana turns around and spots a stack of perfect, mouthwatering pancakes before her spot at the table.

“How the hell did you guys know?” she asks.

“A little birdie informed me,” says Solas, “about two weeks ago.”

A little birdie named Varric, probably. That sly bastard.

“Well I’m not about to look a gift pancake in the mouth,” she says, inching towards her chair and the fork that sits beside the plate. “Though it might look into mine.”

“Dig in,” says Bram, “We’ve already had ours. And then you need to go pack for our weekend trip.”

“Weekend trip?”

“Yep,” says Harding. “All the way to the Emerald Graves Resort, five miles down the road. I’ve used my impressive influence to book us two rooms for a couple of days.”
“Are you shitting me?”

“I shit you not.” Harding grins. “Now hurry up! They just restocked the trout pond.”

The resort stands four stories tall, all rustic cedar and pine, with a wide wrap around porch and rocking chairs. A huge pool surrounded by natural looking rockface complete with hidden grotto and a water slide hangs out in the back, shaded by huge trees.

It’s both beautiful and a little disgusting—a sanitized, commercialized idea of luxury in the country—but Ellana is too excited about the dinner buffet to care. They set their bags down in the room, the guys taking over one down the hall.

Harding flops herself on one of the lush king-sized beds. “My whole family could fit on this bed, though we’re dwarves so that’s not saying much.”

“You could definitely cram at least three elves in it,” Ellana, flopping down beside her. The memory foam mattress sits underneath a plush down comforter. It’s a dangerous kind of bed, one that only the temptation of breakfast will make possible to leave it.

“So, what do you want to do first? The resort itself has a pool and some hiking trails. The trout pond, of course. There’s an arcade in the basement level and a spa.”

“Have you stayed here before?”

“I worked here when I was a teenager,” says Harding. “I know both the owner and every nook and cranny of this building.”

“I haven’t fished in years. Let’s go to the trout pond.”

Harding grinned. “I was hoping you would say that.”

“I don’t think I have ever fished before.”

Solas inspects at the fishing pole in his hands as if it were some lost historical artifact.

They split up into three canoes: Solas and Ellana in one, Cole with Merrill, and Harding and Bram in another. Merrill uses a fly, since Cole can’t bear to hurt even a worm. Solas baits his own hook with a barely concealed look of disgust that Ellana snorts at.

The canoes fan out in different directions. Ellana guides hers to sit just outside some low, overhanging trees.

“Don’t be disappointed if you don’t end up catching something,” she says to him. “Fishing is harder than it looks, and most of the time the fun is in the anticipation rather than the actual catching.”

“I see,” says Solas.

“And be careful with your aim or you’ll end up snagging that tree.”

“Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

Ellana almost demonstrates for him, but he’s being so dismissive of her advice that she would rather
watch him struggle.

Except, five minutes later Solas pulls up a trout almost as long as her arm, and Ellana’s mouth falls open.

“Yes, much harder than it seems,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting into a smirk.

“That’s beginner’s luck,” she says. “Trust me, it’s not going to happen like that all the time.”

Solas rebaits his hook and tosses his line out again – and almost immediately lands another trout. He says nothing, but the smirk that glimmers in his side-eye glances is too much to bear.

“It’s on. You and me.” Ellana says. “Whoever catches the most fish in an hour gets to dunk the loser into the lake.”

“I thought fishing was about anticipation and tranquility?” Solas says innocently.

“It’s going to be about getting your ass kicked out of the canoe, you keep that up.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Fine. A wager then.”

Ellana doesn’t know what barren wasteland the resort carted the trout from, but they are ravenous. They can barely keep up with the tally and they are quickly running out of bait. They remain neck and neck with each other until Solas catches his line on something that refuses to budge.

His teeth grit as his pole slowly bends underneath the weight.

“Stop or you’re going to snap the line,” Ellana says. “You probably caught it on a limb or something.”

Solas stills his grip and the pole suddenly lurches forward. Her hands grab it just before it tips over into the water.

“Do limbs usually pull back?” he says.

The pole nearly vibrates in her hand.

“Well, it’s not a fucking trout, that’s for sure. Help me out!”

The line comes close to snapping many times, but Ellana feeds it enough slack in certain moments to keep it unbroken. Whatever has this thing must be massive – a bass maybe? The petty part of her hopes it really is a tree limb caught in the current. Solas shouldn’t have this much luck, the bastard.

After several minutes of epic struggle, they slowly pull up –

A writhing, snapping bogfisher.

And it is pissed.

Several things happen at once: The bogfisher tries to climb into the canoe, Ellana screams multiple obscenities, Solas slaps the creature in the head with the fishing pole, and the entire boat upends and dumps them all in the water.

For a brief, horrifying second, something brushes past her legs, but when she surfaces, scrambling for purchase on the bottom of the canoe, she spies the bogfisher swimming angrily in the opposite direction, the bright red pole dragged behind him.
“I’m counting that towards my total,” Solas says, pulling a piece of algae from his head. “I’m also declaring us finished for the day which means I am the winner of our competition.”

Ellana shoves her sopping pony tail behind her. “I’m too traumatized to argue with you.”

They dry out on the banks, having spent an embarrassing amount of time trying to tip the canoe back over and find their floating tackle box. Ellana’s pole is also irretrievable, but Solas assures her that he will reimburse the resort for them.

In the interest of time, they both shed their t-shirts and lay them out in the sun, Ellana clad in the sports bra she wore when she first collided into Solas back at Skyhold. Then they stretch out in the grass, looking up at the bright clouds that pass lazily by.

“Happy Birthday, Ellana. You were almost eaten by an eldritch horror from the depths,” he says.

“‘Almost’ being the key word,” she replies. “Have you never seen a bogfisher before?”

“What a close, no.”

Her gaze keeps wanting to slide down to his surprisingly defined abdomen and the tiny piece of hip bone that juts out from underneath his plastered-on jeans.

What is wrong with her? Back home she saw half-naked elves any time it wasn’t actively snowing (and sometimes when it did snow, depending on how much moonshine Aenor drank). Though Solas is surprisingly well toned for a nerdy historian, his body type isn’t something she hasn’t seen a thousand times before.

Not to mention that it’s Solas, who’s still weird and infuriating even if she doesn’t hate his guts anymore. The last thing he needs is some ego trip because she thinks he’s attractive. Or even worse, an incredibly awkward I’m Technically Your Boss and This Is Wildly Inappropriate discussion.

She hauls herself to her feet before he busts her and starts skipping rocks across the water. It’s been so long; the first handful of her throws barely last three skips, but eventually she works her way up to seven and eight.

“I’ve always wondered how people did that.”

She looks over her shoulder to see his curious gaze behind her.

“You’ve never skipped rocks?” she asks flatly.

He shakes his head.

“No fishing, no swimming in your clothes, no skipping rocks? Fuck, Solas, where did you come from? The moon?”

He chuckles. “I did not have as much of a . . . nature intensive childhood as you did.”

“You stayed inside and read books all day, didn’t you?”

“Guilty.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “You’re such a fucking nerd.”
“If you think I’m such a nerd, you need to ask Bram about embroidered heraldry in the early Chantry period sometime. But only if you have a couple of hours to spare.”

“Skipping rocks isn’t that hard. I can show you if you want.”

“Judging from my luck so far today, I would probably hit a nest of bogfishers and we would never make it back to the resort,” he says, but he gets to his feet and shuffles over to her in his bare feet.

“The first step is getting the right rock. It needs to be flat and kind of oblong. And thin. Fat rocks don’t go very far.”

He fishes out several rocks that Ellana dismisses before finding a scrape of sandstone.

“That’s perfect,” she says. “Now, the second step is all in the wrist movement. It’s kind of like throwing frisbee—”

“Which I have never done.”

“Of fucking course not.” Ellana takes the rock and demonstrates the wrist movement herself before giving it to him.

His long fingers curl around it in a death grip.

“No no no. Loosen your grip. Here.” She reaches over and positions his fingers herself. “Now throw it.”

Solas sends it straight to the depths of the river like an anchor. Ellana doesn’t bother stifling her laughter at his thin, pursed lips.

“It always takes a few tries.”

She hunts around for suitable rocks while Solas practices arcing them across the lake. Most of his shots sink through the water, but he’s gotten a couple of two-skips in.

“How do you possibly get eight skips in?” he demands after his tenth sinking. “Show me again how you do it.”

Ellana takes one of the rocks she’s holding for him and flings it across the lake in a perfect, seven-skip arc. “I’m telling you, it’s your wrist. You’re not moving it right.”

“I move it exactly as you do.”

She laughs. “You’re getting pretty frustrated at this.”

The look on his face skirts dangerously close to a pout. “It should be simple physics and yet those rules seem to have abandoned me. It defies all logic.”

“Or maybe you just suck.”

In response to that, Solas practices until they run out of flat rocks, but he never gets above three skips. By then their clothes and the canoe have dried, so they float down to the dock to meet up with the rest of the crew.

“Where’s all your stuff?” Harding asks as they load the canoe in the trailer in the back of the truck they’ve rented.
“The bogfisher took it as recompense,” Ellana says.

“I’m sorry: The what did what?”

The rest of the weekend doesn’t offer as much excitement as trout fishing. Ellana, Harding, and Merrill hit up the spa that evening for massages and the steam room. The next day they hike up to one the overlooks near the resort and have a picnic and the spend the rest of the afternoon and evening by the pool.

The day Solas and Ellana finish the wolf statue the sun filters down through the trees like a blessing. The humidity is low for early Matrinalis with a breeze that ruffles the canopy above them. Really, all that’s left is wiping away the last of the dirt with damp cloths and the few stray leaves that have fallen in the last couple of days.

“This is weirdly depressing,” she says, stepping back and looking at it. “Which is stupid because I worked so hard on this. I should feel some degree of satisfaction.”

“It’s not stupid. I get that feeling on every site,” says Solas. “The loss of purpose or the mystery of the unknown can leave you feeling underwhelmed or lost. But there is usually a new project that comes around that renews your interest and the process starts all over again.”

“I really didn’t think we were going to get through it all before I had to leave.”

“We just barely made it. A fitting way to end your last day.”

Ellana leans against the flank of the statue and gazes around the site, drinking in the site of Merrill and Bram chatting happily as they uncover sections of paving bricks hidden under the dirt, Cole napping under the tent, the leaves swaying in the slight breeze above her.

“I’m going to miss this place,” she says. “I had a lot of fun here.”

“Even though it’s not the sparkling beaches of Antiva?” A hint of a smirk plays at his lips.

She shoves him. “Shut up. A two-month, all expense paid vacation to an ocean paradise with your best friend would have been awesome to someone who could appreciate that kind of thing. I’m just not sure I’m that person.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I figured that out the afternoon we laid by the pool. One or two days of lounging around doing nothing is great. But after that I start to get twitchy—and two months of lazing around or shopping or whatever is just excessive. Maybe Josephine could handle it, but I’ve spent my whole life either working or studying. If I’m not productive in some way I get that little voice in my head that tells me I’m a lazy piece of shit. At least here I accomplished something.”

She gives Fen’Harel’s flank an affectionate pat.

“I greatly admire your work ethic and your determination,” says Solas. “It’s a rare trait for most experienced adults, much less someone your age.”

“Someone my age? Just how old are you, hah’ren?”
“Old enough,” he says, flicking imaginary dirt from his arm. “It’s another new moon tonight, if you would like to see the astrarium again. That is, if you don’t mind being sleep deprived.”

Ellana perks up. “Of course I’m down! I’ll sleep on the plane, I don’t care.”

Solas looks pleased. “Excellent. Make sure you’re packed early tonight, and put everything in the living room.”

Before they leave, Ellana takes selfies with her statue and the rest of the gang. Some are posed, like Bram presenting Merrill with a flower like a courtly Chevalier. Some are taken furtively, like Cole sleeping in the grass or Solas sketching next to the statue. And, of course, she took a close up of the glorious elvhen butts. For Dorian.

It’s bittersweet, that last hike as the sun goes down. The last couple of weeks she has really started to miss her Skyhold crew, the library, and centralized air conditioning. But even though this place isn’t Wycombe, Ellana still felt like she came home this summer, drinking in all the familiar smells and sounds of the Dales, the color of the sunlight, the wide leaves of the deciduous trees.

She wishes she could bottle the smell of honeysuckle to take with her, but settles for a hundred photos and a small, mossy rock.

“Ellana.”

Her name is breathed in the barest whisper, so it’s the cold hand on her shoulder that wakes her before her alarm.

She cracks her eyes open to see Solas’s eyes peer from over the railing of the bunk bed.

Sleep weighs her like an anvil, but she shakes her covers off and silently climbs down from the bed, already dressed in her jeans. She grabs her flannel shirt from the nightstand and follows him out the door, leaving Merrill still snoring softly behind her.

They may follow the same path, but it’s miles away from the first time. This time they walk carefree, Ellana propelled by anticipation rather than uneasy curiosity. This time their banter volleys between them, the sharp edges softened by fondness and followed by comfortable stretches of quiet.

This time he’s Solas and not Dr. Felassan.

Though the astrarium offers a clarity and closeness that the naked eye could never provide, they end up sprawled on the ground with the open sky above them, sharing constellations. Ellana shows him some of the more obscure Dalish ones, mostly rooted in old folktales rather than passed down from Arlathan.

“We call that one Shyael’s Jug,” she says, point off to the left. “Supposedly Shyael was supposed to be a cup bearer for Andruil and one night he was supposed to show up to a big party for the Creators and instead he took off with the booze and got completely shitfaced in the woods. Of course, once a mortal gets a taste for ambrosia – or the Creators’ moonshine as Aenor called it – nothing else will satisfy them. Shyael became a total wreck, so Andruil took the jug of ambrosia and put in the sky so he would always crave it but never be able to touch it again.”

“A rather harsh metaphor for addiction.”

“Dalish moonshine has a long and often ugly history.”
Solas shows her constellations from Avvar, Tevinter, even surface dwarves.

“Dwarves have constellations?”

“I’ve found that any civilization that lives above ground has their own constellations and stories,” Solas says. “And you must remember that early surface dwarves made their living mostly as traveling merchants. The stars became an invaluable navigation tool for them, and thus most of their constellations are representations of those tools. Actually, most of their constellations in general are tools.”

“Show me one.”

Solas points to a cluster of dots near the middle. “Part of the Equus is one arm of their Tongs.”

“So, most Elvhen constellations have to do with the Creators, the Tevinter ones are just rip offs of the Elvhen ones, and dwarves are tools. What are the Avvar ones like?”

“Their constellations center around weapons and the heroes that used them, with a handful of beasts. Their most famous warrior is Tyrdda Bright Axe and her constellation lies just south of Shyael’s Jug.”

He points to a cluster of stars, and no matter how she squints or imagines, her mind cannot comprehend them into any sort of picture.

“There’s no way that’s a person, even excusing the fact that these pictures are all just a bunch of dots.”

“It’s clearly a humanoid outline.”

“It’s clearly a mess.”

“Here. If you’ll allow me.” Solas holds out his hand, and she places her own in his. His grip wraps lightly around her index finger, their silhouette guiding her from one star to the next. “This is the head,” he murmurs, his cheek nearly touching hers. Their fingers drag downward, tracing the lines of the body. “And this is the torso . . . And this is the axe.”

His eyes slide over to hers, and his gaze feels almost tangible even though she can barely see it in the darkness. “Do you see it now?”

Her brain only wants to focus on the shocking proximity between them. Solas is a man of walls, of carefully cultivated distance, and the fact that he’s laying down next to her, breathing close to her ear, holding her hand in his cool fingers, feels almost unreal.

Ellana clears her throat and pulls her hand away. “Yep. Totally.”

“You’re lying,” he says, bemused.

“Well I don’t have an artist’s brain like yours. It’s all dots to me.”

“Perhaps with enough practice you’ll see the bigger picture,” he says, a soft smile playing on his lips. His words sound heavy with another meaning, but Ellana is too distracted to translate it.

“Maybe.”
Ellana has been saying her goodbyes in the dark kitchen for the last twenty minutes while Solas waits patiently with her suitcase by the door.

“You have to promise to email me!” Merrill squeezes Ellana like a corset. “And video call me on holidays! And have Solas give me your address at the school.”

“Oh okay,” Ellana wheezes out.

“Oi, you’re gonna suffocate her,” says Bram, gently pulling Merrill by the shoulders.

“I will send you postcards,” Cole promises solemnly.

“You were a god-send, Ellana,” Bram says, shaking her hand. “I don’t know what we’re going to do without you. If you ever want to get into field school, I’ll write your recommendation.”

Even Harding turned up, yawning sleepily with a giant travel mug of coffee in one hand.

“If you’re ever in the area, hit me up,” she says, grinning sleepily at her. “I always need a fishing partner. I’ll bring a mallet for the bogfishers.”

“I will,” Ellana promises, stooping down to hug her.

They all follow her onto the porch, waving as Solas tucks her suitcase into the trunk and starts the car. Ellana waves back until the trees swallow up the cabin, grey in the early morning light, her throat tight.

She always seems to be leaving someone.

By the time they pass the entrance to the park, Ellana is dead out, exhausted by their late night astrarium visit. She wakes roughly half an hour from the airport, blinking sleepily into the early morning sunshine.

“Have a restful nap?”

She stretches, narrowly missing knocking Solas in the cheek. “Yes, actually. As much fun as the astrarium is, I definitely pay for it the next day. How are you not nodding off into a ditch?”

“When you become a grad student, you get used to running on little to no sleep,” he says. “It’s a skill that has stuck by me through the years.”

“And how many years is that?” Ellana asks with faux innocence.

The corner of his mouth twitches. “More than I will ever tell you.”

Ellana gazes at his face with a critical eye, looking for signs of his age. His lack of hair makes it difficult to gauge – the only hint of his original color coming from the slight auburn tint of his eyebrows. In fact, the only hint of his age comes from the delicate crow’s feet, almost invisible, and the faint creases around his mouth.

“You know, you don’t actually look that old. I’d place you at maybe 33 . . . ish”

He snorts softly. “Then that makes keeping my secret even more pressing.”

“I’ll find out one day,” she says, looking back out the window.
He walks her through the bag check in and ticket line all the way to security. Reluctance bogs down each step, despite her itching to get back to Varric’s and take a nice long shower. For a long moment they stand facing each other. The moment stretches out between them, heavy with a significance that Ellana has no words for.

“I know this summer didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to,” he says carefully. “But I wanted you to know that your help was indispensable to the site. Bram was correct – we don’t know what we would have done without you. I certainly would have passed by the Fen’Harel statue entirely. I will make sure that your name gets credited in regards to its discovery—and for the discovery of the paintings.”

A blush threatens her cheeks – Ellana bites the inside of her lip to keep from grinning like an idiot.

“Thanks, Solas. That means a lot, especially coming from you. I know we didn’t really have a great start.”

The edge of his mouth quirks up. “I’ve very much enjoyed your company, despite our . . . earlier disagreements.”

“‘Disagreements’ is a bit of an understatement,” she says, a grin of her own spreading against her will. “But I’m glad we met. You’re alright when you’re not a pretentious jackass.”

He bows his head in thanks. “I will take that as the compliment it is.” He hesitates a moment before asking, “Have you thought about what you are going to say to Fen’Harel? I have a feeling he might be eager to hear from you after two months of silence.”

Ellana shrugs. “No idea. It’ll probably be spontaneous word vomit, like it usually is.”

“Well I wish you luck, and I hope you have an excellent year coming up.”

He holds out his hand to shake hers, stiff and formal. Ellana rolls her eyes and pulls him in for a hug. He freezes for a moment and she thinks she may have made a mistake, but then he relaxes and places his hands gingerly around her back.

“Keep in touch when you get service,” she tells him.

“Naturally. I will update you on all our progress.”

“And send me pictures.”

“Of course.”

She pulls away, surprised at the sudden reluctance to let go that wells up in her.

“Next time you’re in Skyhold, call me ahead of time so I don’t break your nose again,” she says.

“I’ve learned my lesson, don’t worry.” He nods over to the security line. “You best be off.”

“Yeah, I know.” Ellana smiles at him. “See you around, Solas.”

“Dareth shiral,” he says softly, and his pronunciation is perfect. Of course.

She nods and turns away, walking resolutely to the security line. She only looks back once, when she’s at the end of the line, and tosses him one last wave before heading to his gate.
“How much longer, Josie?”

Ellana sits on her hands to fight the urge to lift up the blindfold that Krem ambushed her with once they got into the airport parking garage.

“Just a few more minutes. We’re almost at the parking lot.”

“Parking lot?”

Even after the car parks, Krem and Josie won’t let her take the blindfold off.

Do you guys know how really fucking weird this is?” she complains as Krem maneuvers her out of the car and steers her in some random direction.

“There’s a step here,” he says by reply.

Ellana stubs her toe anyway on what feels like concrete. A curb?

“Motherfucker,” she hisses, hopping on one foot. “This had better be worth it.”

There’s a strange clicking sound, the jangle of keys, a door opening. Krem guides her through it and stops her a few steps in. Then he pulls the bandana down.

Ellana stands in a living room, decked out in two royal blue plush couches, mahogany coffee table, a television mounted on the wall that is thinner than most children’s books. Beyond the living room is a small, open kitchen, a hallway jutting out to the left that leads to three doors. The layout looks exactly like Varric’s apartment but none of this is his furniture.

“What is this?” she asks slowly.

Josephine actually hops up and down in her excitement. “Surprise! This is our apartment!”

Ellana blinks. “Excuse me – our apartment?”

“Yes! I applied for student housing in the apartments and since I’m an incoming senior, I was finally applicable! And since most seniors want to live by themselves, I was able to get us a two bedroom easily. They practically gave it to me.”

Ellana surveys her surroundings again with new eyes. The décor screamed Josephine, elegant and lush with intense colors and gold accents everywhere. She doesn’t know how she missed it earlier.

“Oh my Creators,” she murmurs.

“Do you like it? We can redecorate it later, I just put some basics up so it wouldn’t seem so bare.”

“It’s gorgeous. It’s just – holy shit. How much did all of it cost? Is this all new furniture?”

Josephine waves a hand. “My parents have a house fund for each of their children and I just cashed it out early.”

A house fund. Creators.

Josephine grabs her hand and pull her down the hallway. “Come see your room!”

Her bedroom sits at the end with a window that overlooks the Quad. The bed, dresser, and desk are all made of warm cherry wood. Her velvet green comforter lays with several plush pillows. Carved
leaves climb up the four posts of her bed and decorate the sides of her desk and drawer knobs.

It’s breathtaking. She feels like crying.

Josephine rests her chin on Ellana’s shoulder.

“Do you like it? I just picked out the furniture, but I’ll leave most of the decorating up to you.”

“This is perfect,’ Ellana says faintly. “You didn’t have to,”

“As if I could move out without you! Besides, all the money I would have spent on you in Antiva went into this room instead. All of your clothes are already hanging in the closet and the rest of your stuff is in totes in the closet floor.” She drops a kiss on Ellana’s cheek. “I’ll leave you to get unpacked and comfortable.”

Ellana takes a minute to sit on the bed and take it all in. No more shitty heating in the winter. No more communal showering. No raucous laughter at three am when she has a test tomorrow.

It feels almost too good to be true.

Once she has unpacked and sorted her dirty laundry and set up her moss rock in the window sill, Ellana sets the laptop on her new desk. She takes a deep breath.

She writes.

Chapter End Notes

And we are now back to our regularly programmed college shenanigans.
Junior Year First Semester

Chapter Notes

I did not expect this long between updates, but the holidays destroyed me. Anybody else? Haha. Happy Late New Year to everyone!

*Edit* There was some crazy formatting errors when I first posted it which should be fixed

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: So . . .

Listen, I’m just going to clear the air here. What you did was shitty. Not planning the trip itself, exactly, but not giving me a choice about it. I know I owe you a lot because of what you’ve done for me, but I don’t owe you my freedom. And if you think that because you pay for my education that I have to do anything and everything you tell me to, then I’m out. I’m serious. I will drop out, I will put myself in fifty thousand years worth of debt, I’ll go be a garbage collector before I will let myself get yanked around by you like a puppet on strings.

I thought we were friends. I trusted you, I told you things that I’ve never told anyone else, and it sucks to feel like you’re using your money as a way to control me.

Don’t ever tell me what to do again.

The second after she hits send, she slams the laptop shut. Already the urge to check her email rises up even though it’s only been like five seconds.

She fights that urge all through dinner and the movie Josie puts on to show off the new TV. Even though they have two couches, Krem and Josie squeeze in on either side of her.

“Tell us of we’re being obnoxious,” Krem says.

“We just missed you,” says Josephine.

Eyllana stretches her arms around both of their shoulders and pointedly shoves any thought of Fen’Harel aside.

She lasts until the next morning, when she rolls over and groggily checks her email on her phone.

His reply sends a jolt of unease down to the pit of her stomach.

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: fen_harel@mail.com

Re: Subject: So . . .

Ellana,

You have every right to be angry at me. I must admit, at first, I thought you were acting like a petulant child, throwing a fit because you didn’t get to waste your summer away partying like the stereotypical college girl I know you are not.

But your continued silence made me realize later that I had hurt you, perhaps irreparably. When I had planned your trip, I wanted it to be a surprise, and it never occurred to me that you would not want to go, even with the temptation of a trip to Antiva.

It was never my intention to force you to go, something I don’t believe Abelas quite understood when I gave him his instructions. But I shouldn’t have used Abelas. I should have just asked you directly.

I don’t believe that I can order you about just because I am paying for your tuition and I would never hold my wealth over your head to pressure you into do anything you would not want to do. I’m deeply sorry that I have made you feel that way.

I will still pay for your tuition at Skyhold, no strings attached. You do not have to email me or even acknowledge my existence. Just please do not drop out of school out of pride. You are too bright and too full of potential to not get your education.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Re:Re: So . . .

We’ll see

“So how was your summer mucking around in the Dales? Did you feel close to your roots around all that dirt? And get your filthy shoes off my desk. This is solid ebony, you know.”

Ellana kicks off her shoes and puts her feet back up on Dorian’s desk.

“It was great. You know how much I love dirt.”

“I do. And also trees and fresh air and other horrendous things.” Dorian grabs one of Iron Bull’s cookies from a tin on his desk and shoves it over to Ellana.

“So tell me – and be honest – how often did you resist the urge to strangle Solas?”

Ellana almost chokes on her cookie. “Oh my god, you too! How the hell does he know all of my
friends? It’s creepy.”

“He works here, darling, of course we all know him. His office is on the floor above mine. But we were roommates in undergrad, so that’s how I met him.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I’m not,” he says.

Dorian’s loud vanity and shameless attention seeking behavior mixed with Solas’s quietly judgmental nature and superiority complex? Creators.

“How did you two not kill each other?”

“Oh, there were attempts made on both sides, which is how I can guess that you spent most the summer wanting to murder him. He has a rather childish opinion on the Dalish, as I recall.”

“That’s an understatement,” Ellana says. “And yeah, I spent the first half of the summer losing my absolute shit on him until he knocked it off.”

“You didn’t hit him -- not even once?” Dorian asks, disappointed.

“I came very close on more than one occasion. But once his ego got knocked down a few pegs, Solas was pretty fun to be around.”

“Yes, that does sound like him. To be honest, I rather miss him,-- he’s been on field work the last two years, and the year before that he was conferencing in Orlais.”

A small but insistent tap comes from the door.

“Office hours are over,” Dorian calls out lazily, not even looking up. “I’m working very hard on . . . various math paraphernalia.”

“I’m not here for office hours,” comes Dr. Giselle’s distinctive accent, “and we all know you do your best work at three in the morning the day before the deadline with an illegal blood alcohol content.”

Dorian shoots up from his desk so fast that the cookie tin wobbles. Ellana’s feet get shoved back down to the floor before he opens the door with a gracious bow.

“Dr. Giselle! What an honor. You’re looking particularly lovely this evening.”

Dr. Giselle walks in and gives Ellana only the barest of eyebrow raises. “I would question why you have a young female student in your office after hours with the door locked, if your affair with Coach Bull wasn’t the worst kept secret in Skyhold.”

“I’m Ellana’s advisor and her scheduling went longer than expected. She can’t decide which one of Dr. Sten’s art history classes to take.”

“It’s rare he gets such dedication from his students,” says Giselle with only a hint of irony. “I have need of your services, Dorian. I’m afraid I’ve locked my keys in my office again.”

“Ah. No matter. We’ll have you back in in a jiffy.”

Dorian rummages around in his desk before pulling out a hair pin and a sturdy paperclip.

“I’ll return shortly, Ellana. In the meantime, you can flip a coin to decide which sculpture class you
want to torture yourself with.”

“Oh, don’t mind me.” Her eyes dart towards the cookie tin, which Dorian had been guarding jealously their whole visit, giving Ellana only two fucking cookies and hoarding the rest for himself when he’s got direct access to the source, that stingy bastard.

His sharp eyes do not miss the direction of her gaze.

“As a matter of fact, I’m afraid I’m not allowed to leave students unsupervised in my office.”

“That’s bullshit! I’ve been in here a ton of times while you run off to get your custom lattes at the café.”

He opens the door wider for her. “Well, if you think I’m going to leave you alone with that cookie tin, you’re as stupid as you look. Now, come along.”

She follows with minimal groaning as they take the elevator three floors up. Dr. Giselle asks Ellana about her classes and her major and her classes this semester as they walk.

Dr. Giselle’s office lies at the end of the hallway, a bulletin board next to her door with pictures of country scenery and hand written scraps of the Chant of Light in beautiful calligraphy pinned to it.

Dorian squats down in front of the door knob, hairpin in his mouth like a cigarette, as he unwinds the paperclip. In less than a minute he has jiffied the lock and the door swings open with a slight creak.

“And that is why it’s important to cultivate relationships with those of more dubious backgrounds,” says Dr. Giselle with a smile. “Thank you again, Dorian. I don’t know where my head was this morning.”

She reaches up and ruffles a bit of Dorian’s gelled coiffure and he actually lets her.

“Probably on whatever sad child charity your heart has focused on this year,” he says, and Ellana can see his fingers twitch with the urge to fix his hair. “And I am always happy to help. Now if you’ll excuse us, Ellana needs to decide her masochistic fix for the year.”

Dr. Giselle bows her head at Ellana. “May you have a good year.”

“Thank you,” Ellana replies with a smile. “You too.”

She waits until they are out of earshot before she speaks again.

“So where the hell did your pampered ass learn how to pick locks?”

“Didn’t you hear Dr. Giselle? I’m a delinquent. Formerly.”

Ellana snorts. “Like I would believe that.”

“It’s true. I ran away from home at fifteen, was on the streets for a while before my best friend’s father took me in. You’re not the only unsavory character I’ve befriended in the past.”

“So getting into fist fights makes people unsavory now?”

“In most polite societies, yes.”

They arrive back at his office and settle back into their seats.
“So what’s up with you and Dr. Giselle?”

Dorian’s hand snakes back into the cookie tin. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she says jump and you pull out the trampoline. You dote on her.”

“Jealous, Ellana?”

“Curious. I didn’t think the great Dorian Pavus kowtowed to anyone.”

“She was my adviser in university,” Dorian says, leaning back in his chair. “You think I’m obnoxious now, I was an unbearable prick at fifteen and she put up with none of it. Most people bent over for either my wealth or my status, but not her. Oh no. She had never even heard of House Pavus and she cared not a single shit for money or bloodlines or reputations. All that mattered to her was my intelligence and my potential, and she accepted nothing less than my absolute best. She drove me insane.”

“And twenty years later she still scares the shit out of you?”

“Twenty years later I haven’t forgotten that she was the first person who cared about my future with no strings attached, who developed my potential purely for my own benefit, and helped me untangle the mess I had made of myself. If that woman wanted me to walk over hot coals I would do it without question. But also, yes, she scares the shit out of me.”

Ellana smiles. “Oh, I get it. She’s your mom.”

Dorian snorts. “Dr. Giselle has more class in her pinky nail than in my mother’s entire being. Now, are we done grilling about my embarrassing adolescence or is Dr. Sten going to have to hunt you down because all his slots filled up?”

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To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: s_felassan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: I believe you asked for this

I hope you don’t mind this intrusion. I’ve had your email from the application you did not send me, and I thought I would use it to fulfill a promise. As you are well aware, one does not break the bonds of shared spit lightly.

If you recall, you allowed me to uncover the statue of Fen’Harel only if I immortalized it in my art. I have no access to proper paint supplies out here, but I did draw a rather impressive portrait of it. I’ve attached a scan of it here. Do tell me if it passes your muster.

Yours,

Solas.

---

To: s_felassan@skyholdu.edu

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Hey Solas! No, I don’t mind that you have my email. I mean, you are upholding your end of the deal. And you’re right, you can’t forsake a spit shake promise, that shit’s legit.

Your picture is beautiful! I can tell you spent a lot of time on it. Your use of chiaroscuro is impressive, with the sun beams behind it and the tree shade above it. I also like the angle of your picture, it makes the Dread Wolf loom over the viewer. Very powerful.

(I’m trying to put my knowledge from Dr. Sten to good use.)

How is the site since I left? Has Bram found his buckles yet? Has Harding finally laid her moves on him?

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: s_felassan@skyholdu.edu
Re: re: Subject: I believe you asked for this

I’m glad that you like the painting. I started the sketch of it before you had even left, but it took some time to get the paint and canvas. Harding had to special order some of it for me. Dr. Sten would be proud of your analysis of my painting.

The site has gone well. We are starting to get cooler days interspersed with the humidity, which make for a much more pleasant experience. I can send up updates on our finds if you would like?

Things remain the same as you left them on the Harding/Bram front. They circle around each other, smiles and flirtations held carefully in check. At times I have to wonder if either of them is even aware of the extent of their feelings.

Still no sign of buckles, to Bram’s ever-growing disappointment.

Yours,

Solas

“Hey. Do this with us.”

A flyer is slapped on the table in front of her, nearly landing in her plate of eggs. Ellana looks up to see Varric and Sera standing in front of her like a couple of mafia hitmen.

“No, Sera, if you’d wanted to go the intimidation route, you should’ve probably lifted some weights first,” says Varric, “or grabbed some blackmail.”

Sera rolls her eyes. “Do this with us . . .please.”

“What is it?” Ellana takes the flyer – bright yellow and very eye catching – and scans it over. “Archery club?”

Varric shrugs. “I used to run one back when I was in school. It’s a dying art form, and not a lot of people are interested in it, but Sera has been sniffing around my crossbow for months and I thought
“What the hell?”

“I haven’t shot a bow in years,” says Ellana, inspecting the flyer. “What do we do at this club?”

“We get together. We shoot things. Hawke and I had a series of increasingly impossible challenges I could reinstate.”

“Alright,” she shrugs. “What the hell, right?”

The first thing Varric makes clear is that nobody touches Bianca. Sera looks visibly deflated at this, but perks up at the selection of compound bows that he offers. They’re in one of the small gyms, three targets set up on stands, with a couple of compound bows on a folding table beside them. Sera picks one up and hefts it in her hand.

“Have you ever shot anything before?” Varric asks her.

“Nope!” she says cheerfully.

“Okay, well, some pointers before you start waving that thing around.”

He takes hold of the bow and starts positioning her fingers around it. Ellana takes her own bow in hand, testing the pull of it. It pulls back much easier than a recurve bow.

“Ellana, how about a demonstration?” he asks.

He hands her an arrow and waves at the target set roughly ten feet away. Ellana takes a look at the target for a moment, then pulls back the arrow and shoots it.

It sails way over the target and smacks the wall behind it.

“Wow,” Sera says, dragging the word out. “I thought you said you’ve done this before.”

“Shut up. I’ve never shot a bow like this one before.”

Varric nods. “You’re used to recurve bows, aren’t you?”

“Every bow I’ve handled was hand carved,” she says.

“Well, even if she missed the target, her form is mostly right. Try again, Ellana, and Sera, you copy her stance.”

He hands them both arrows and Ellana gets into position again.

“You shot too quickly the last time,” he tells Ellana. “Compound bows do not overdraw the same way recurve bows do. You have the luxury of time when it comes to aiming. Try again.”

Sera watches her as she pulls the arrow back, giving herself time to line up her arrow before she releases.

It lands in the target this time, at least.

“Much better,” he says clapping her on the shoulder.

“Let’s see you,” she says.
“Yeah,’ echoes Sera. “You brag about that crossbow so damn much. You might as well marry it.”

“You think I’m full of shit?” he says, crossing his arms.

“I think Bianca is all talk and no action,” Sera says. “I think she’s just there to look pretty.”

Varric’s eyebrows raise up. “Oh. You want Bianca to come out and play? Alright.”

Beside the table lies a gleaming wooden case. Varric props it up on the table and opens it on silent hinges. Inside lies the strangest bow Ellana has ever seen; bulky yet sleek, full of levers and switches and metal. It sags a bit in his arms when he takes it into his arms.

“Hey baby,” he murmurs to it. “Ready to kick some ass?”

He loads an arrow into it, steps up beside Ellana, aims for a moment, and fires.

The arrow busts out of that thing like a bullet, hitting the center target with such force that it explodes straight through the target and embeds itself into the wall.

“Shit.”

Varric runs over to inspect the arrow, pulling it out with a shower of drywall behind it. Footsteps sound from somewhere, getting close.

“Alright, that concludes our first club meeting. Grab a bow and get the hell out of here.”

“Where the fuck did you get something like that?” Ellana demands as they run out the back door. “That’s not a normal bow, cross or otherwise.”

Varric pats Bianca affectionately. “A present.”

Ellana 3:25 pm

ever heard of bianca?

Attachement: 1 image

I will never doubt her power again

Solas 7:21 pm

Terrifying

Solas 6:56 pm

attachment: 1 image

Cole asked me to send you this
Is that . . . a flower offering for the fen’harel statue?

It is indeed.

Cole and Merrill have been paying their respects occasionally.

Cole because the wolf looks lonely.

Merrill so the Dread Wolf isn’t displeased by her presence.

adorable

Three weeks into classes and Sten throws them a pop quiz because he busted the transfer student doodling notes during one of his slide shows and took great offense. And Ellana knows it’s a dumbass transfer student because no one who has already had Dr. Sten would doodle and stare out in the window in class if you put a gun to their head.

Ellana finishes in about ten minutes because she sits in the front row and she would rather have her ears clipped than have Dr. Sten catch her not copying down his every word.

Outside, the late summer sun is shining, the breeze gentle and cool, the trees vividly green against the bright mountain sky. It’s the perfect day to read under her favorite oak. Ellana swerves towards the student apartments to grab her book.

The door swings open, unlocked, and the sight before her leaves Ellana frozen in the entryway:

Josephine, crawled up in Krem’s lap and kissing him. Heavily. Their arms are wrapped around each other like squid.

“What the fuck ,” she says, more to herself than anything else. She feels like a robot confronted with something not in its database. What is happening before her just does not compute.

It scares the shit out of her friends, though. Josephine jerks back from Krem so hard she falls off the couch and tumbles onto the floor. Krem stands up, twitching between the instinct to help her up and the desire to look less incriminating.

Josephine leaps to her feet, her fingers delicately pushing back hair from her mussed bun.

“Ellana! What are you doing here?”

“Um, I live here?” Ellana narrows her eyes. “What the hell is going on?”

Krem’s face turns bright red. “I – well it’s – Josie and I --”

“We’ve been together since the summer,” Josephine blurts out.
None of this is still computing. Ellana blinks. “You were Antiva over the summer.”

“Not the whole summer. I came back early. And Krem and I --” she looks down. “It just happened.”

Ellana’s not actually surprised. It’s not like Krem hasn’t carried a torch for Josephine since their first semester together. But finding them making out on the couch when they hadn’t given off not even a whiff of a relationship . . . Ellana combs her memories of the last few weeks, looking for signs she might have missed and comes up empty.

“Just how long have you two been sneaking around behind my back – behind everybody’s back?” she demands. “Do you even have an 8 o’clock class, Josephine?”

“No,” she says in a small voice.

“So you’ve been lying to me?”

Hurt flares up, stark and sudden.

“We didn’t know how to tell you, so we just --”

“Didn’t,” Ellana finishes flatly. “That was a brilliant idea, Josephine. Great job.”

Her heart starts to thud in her ears, her temper churning in her gut ready to rise and cause all kinds of hell. Why is she getting so angry?

“Hey!” snaps Krem. “It’s our business on how we tell other people or even if we tell other people. We don’t owe you an explanation for shit.”

“Actually, I think I’m owed a lot of explanation for walking in on two people about to fuck each other in my apartment!”

She can tell by the pale, horrified look on Josephine’s face – kind, careful, dignified Josephine – that Ellana has crossed a line, but she’s too far gone to feel anything more than a hint of shame.

“It’s Josephine’s apartment, thank you very fucking much.”

“Krem!” Josephine gasps.

The words hit her like a physical blow. This is Krem saying these words to her. This is Josephine lying to her. These are her best friends, the people she can count on, implying that she’s some charity case, keeping secrets from her as if she can’t be trusted with anything, looking at her like she’s a bloodthirsty savage.

Fucking Creators, she’s starting to feel like one.

“You’re absolutely right,” she says.

With shaking hands she reaches into her pocket, takes her keys out, and throws them onto the floor before walking out.

She doesn’t even reach the quad before she hears the sound of footsteps behind her.

“Hey!” Krem shouts. “You can’t just leave like that!”
“Try and stop me,” she yells back, not even glancing behind her.

“Josephine’s a wreck back there, you can’t just leave her like that.”

That makes Ellana stop in her tracks. But her anger has overwhelmed even the guilt that peaks at the thought of Josephine sobbing on the couch.

“I’m sure you can kiss and make it all better. Just remember to lock the fucking door next time.”

“You’re not going to make me feel ashamed for dating her,” he snaps and the irony of that makes Ellana whirl around.

“You’re the one making it a godsdamn secret, Krem!”

“Why are you so fucking pissed about this? You didn’t care that I had a crush on her, but now that we’re dating, all of a sudden you got this huge problem about it? What the fuck?”

“I don’t care that you’re dating her! I’m pissed cause you lied about it!”

Her throat feels tight with tears and godsdamn it.

“How hard would it have been to tell me the day I got back? To fucking text it to me while I was still gone? I thought we were friends, I thought friends told each other shit, but apparently I’m just the elven squatter living on Josephine’s charity just so I can cock block her --”

“Maker’s fucking balls, Ellana. That’s not what I said!” Krem yells.

“It’s what you meant!” she yells back. “I’m gone two months and all this shit changes behind my back and no one fucking bothers to tell me about it until it blows up in my face – I’ve been down that fucking road before and I don’t fucking like it!”

And there it is, the real culprit of her anger, flying out of her mouth almost before her own brain can comprehend it. She sinks down into the grass, chest heaving and tears leaking down her red face, trying to block out flashes of that memory.

Krem says nothing either, but the look on his face is stark.

“This is not like that time with your clan,” he says finally.

Ellana presses her forehead to her knees. Why does it still bother her? Why can’t she get past it? It’s making her act like a psycho.

She hears Krem sit tentatively in the grass beside her.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “We screwed up. The whole time Josephine was tying herself in knots because she was terrified you would get pissed if we didn’t tell you in the exact, perfect situation, which never seemed to come up, and then time kept passing, which made telling you even more awkward and then it blew up in our faces exactly the way we didn’t want it to.”

She turns her head to face him. “It didn’t occur to either one of you that hiding it from me and lying to my face was, like, the worst option you could have picked?”

“It was stupid. I knew it was stupid. It’s just . . .” he sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “I was too scared to tell you because I didn’t know how you would take it.”

“Why would I get mad about it? I knew you’ve liked her this whole time. We talked about it.”
“Because I’m not a – a normal guy,” Krem says, spitting the words out like they physically pain him.

“You think I would get mad because you’re trans?” Ellana says flatly. “Krem, what the fuck? Seriously?”

“People have different levels of acceptance, Ellana!” He pulls up a fistful of grass and starts ripping it to pieces, not looking at her. “They don’t care that I’m trans right up until a certain point – like using a fucking bathroom or holding hands with someone – and then all of a sudden they have a problem. And every time it happens it feels like getting decked in the face because I’ve trusted people who said they didn’t care and then they pull that shit and – I’m tired of it. And I don’t know how well I could handle it coming from you. I know you’re my best friend . . .but that just makes it worse.”

Ellana struggles a moment for a reply.

“Look, I’m not going to pretend I know what trans people like you go through or struggle with because I will never know. But I do know what it feels like to wait for the other shoe to drop with other people’s ingrained prejudices. And it sucks. I get it.”

He finally looks up at her. “I’m sorry for what I said about it being Josephine’s apartment. That was . . .that was really shitty. I can’t believe that it came out of my mouth.”

“I’m sorry I freaked out on you guys. I don’t know why I get so angry at stuff. You both deserve to be happy. I don’t want to ruin it.”

Krem knocks his shoulder into hers. “You should head back to Josephine before she gets too worked up. Tell her I apologized for me?”

“You’re not going back with me?”

“Oh no. No. She’s super pissed at me for what I said to you. She told me to get you back or don’t show my stupid face around her ever again.”

Something warm and fond blooms in her chest at that.

Josephine pounces on Ellana the second she walks through the door, apologizing without breath until Ellana puts her hands on Josephine’s shoulders and threatens to shake her.

“Creators, Josie, it’s ok . I overreacted and acted like a jackass. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

Josephine leans her head against Ellana’s shoulder. “No, you have every right to be angry. This is not how I wanted it to happen.”

“I know. Krem told me. It’s alright.”

“Did he also apologize?” Her eyes are fierce. “I cannot believe he said that to you, Ellana. I almost hit him myself.”

“Yes, he did. Everything is okay. You can stop freaking out.”

Josephine swipes the corners of her eyes with her thumb. “I hate fighting. I hate it.”

“I don’t fancy it myself,”

She walks them both to the couch and sinks down.
“I’m sorry I lied,” Josephine says. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“I don’t need to know all the particulars of your love life with Krem,” Ellana says, squirming a little. “But . . . I thought you had said you were too busy to date?”

“I’ve used that excuse for years,” Josephine sighs. “I’m very picky and all my standards came from my favorite romantic movies and it was easy to say that instead of admitting that what I wanted couldn’t be real. It felt safer that way. But Krem is . . . he’s a good person. He’s worthy of my trust. He tries so hard and I admire him and it hit me this summer that I had feelings for him that were not friendly.”

She laughs. “Maker, Ellana, I wish you had been here because I absolutely lost my mind over it. Of course my family will have reservations about him because he’s not Antivan, he’s not wealthy, he’s not from a prominent family, he’s not majoring in anything that will give him accolades or money. But I don’t care. He makes me happy and I don’t have to worry about him using me to get to my money or connections.”

“I’m happy for you,” Ellana says. “He’s liked you pretty much since the beginning. I thought it was never going to happen.”

“I can keep it a secret a little longer if you want to make a bet with Varric,” she offers with a grin. “That’s a tempting offer.”

The next night they gather at the Hanged Man. Krem and Josephine tell the rest of their friends about their status change. Krem receives many pats on the back and wolf whistles, while Josephine blushes uncontrollably and grins. Zev bemoans the fact that neither of them are on the market anymore and jokingly asks about open relationships because he has a lot of practice in handling two people at once.

And literally nothing else is different, except Krem refuses to let Josephine pay for anything, despite the fact that she could buy his whole family fifteen times over. They don’t hang all over each other or parade a bunch of PDA or call each other stupid pet names.

The only noticeable change is the distinct glow of happiness in their eyes.

It’s especially apparent when they dance. After three straight dances in a row with Zevran, Ellana needs a breather. Even Zevran sits with her at the bar, sweat glittering on his exposed chest because he only buttons his shirts from the navel down. But Krem and Josephine keep at it, laughing one minute and looking like they might make out right there on the dance floor the next.

She’s surprised by sudden jealousy that pricks at her.

“You want another?” Zevran asks, nodding at the empty beer bottle she’s gripping a little too tightly.

“No,” she says. “I think I should quit.”

“Are you alright?”

“I think there might be something wrong with me,” she says, her thoughts loosened by the alcohol.

“I can ease up on the spinning if you feel sick.”
Ellana shakes her head. “It’s not that. It’s . . . that . . .” she points at Josephine and Krem.

His eyebrows raise at that. “Are you . . . in love with one of them?”

“No! Creators no. That’s just it though, I don’t think I’ve ever been in love with anybody. I had one crush in middle school on my best friend and that was it. I’m in college, surrounded by attractive single friends that I admire and I’m not into any of you. I don’t think that’s normal.”

Zevran gives her a concerned look. “Ellana, there is no normal. There is just what is common and what isn’t. What has been allowed by society and what has been oppressed.”

Ellana leans back against the bar. “I just thought I was like everybody else and now I’m wondering if I’m not normal or uncommon or whatever you want to call it.”

“In my experience – which is much vaster than yours, no offense – there are many people who place their value on the love of their friends and family and do not want or miss a romantic attachment. There are some people who have romantic attachments but no desire for sex. And there are some people for whom either one of those options comes like a lightning strike: rare and unexpected and powerful.”

Zevran takes her chin in his hands and turns her gaze to him. “There is nothing wrong with you, Ellana Lavellan. You are not a freak, you are not defective. You just are. Live your life and do what makes you happy and don’t worry about normal . . .”

“That’s easier said than done,” she murmurs.

“Yes it is,” he says, pulling his hand back. “But that is what you must do.”

Ellana turns her gaze back towards the dance floor. Krem and Josephine lean against each other, finally starting to lose their momentum. She doesn’t know if she wants the romance or the normalcy of a romance, but Zevran’s description of a lightning strike sticks with her.

Solas 8:57 pm

Attachment: 1 image

Ellana 8:57 pm

What the hell is that?

Solas 8:57 pm

We think it’s a lock of some sort

Bram 8:58 pm

Hopefully tomorrow I can rinse and we can see nail holes!
Ellana 8:58 pm

any sign of a buckle?

Bram 8:58 pm

Alas, no.

When will my buckles come home from the war?

Archery club moves to the outdoors, in a little used track and field up on a hill. In just a few meetings, Sera’s skill becomes comparable to most of the hunters in Ellana’s clan.

“You’re so full of shit,” Ellana says after Sera gets her third bullseye in a row. “There’s no way you’d never shot a bow before this.”

Sera laughs. “Jelly, Ellie? Maybe you’re the one lying. I thought Dalish elves were supposed to be good at this.”

Ellana shoves her. “If we’re talking stereotypes then it must be your elven blood that makes you good at this.”

Sera shoves her back. “Shuddup.”

Eventually both of them start tackling the challenges that Varric and his friend Hawke set up. This includes the kind of shit that Dalish only do when they’re drunk – shooting three arrows at once, shooting in the middle of a back flip, etc. Ellana sends videos to Solas every now and then.

The game is called Murder and all you need apparently are a set of plastic knives and a complete severing of emotional bond.

Sera reads the rules out from her phone their first night back at the Hanged Man. One of her Jenny friends has offered a hundred sovs in cash for the winner.

“Everyone who’s participating gets a plastic knife with someone else’s name on it,” she says. “You’ve got to kill the person whose name is the one on your knife and take their knife and then kill the person on that knife until there’s only two people left and then whoever kills the other first gets a hundred bucks.”

Dorian leans over the pool table, jutting his ass out just because Iron Bull is sitting behind him. “For the sake of argument, what kind of killing are we talking about here?”

“Fake killing, obvi,” says Sera. “The knife has to touch the target’s neck or bare stomach. And there can’t be any other witnesses.”

“What if they jump you in the shower?” Ellana asks.

“There can be designated safe areas or times if we want them. So who’s in?”
Krem, Zevran, Iron Bull, and Varric’s hands shoot up immediately. Ellana throws her hand in because she’s never snubbed her nose at free money.

“That’s it?” Sera looks around the room, disgusted. “Come on, you bunch of pussies.”

“I’ve got all the money I need,” says Dorian primly. “I’m not debasing myself in childish games.”

“But I thought you loved it when I put things up to your neck,” Coach Bull rumbles, the edge of his lips twisting into a smirk. “Don’t mind him, Sera. He can’t handle losing and he knows he won’t win this.”

Dorian spins around so fast he nearly takes Ellana’s head off with the cue stick. “I’m in, if only to shut this one up. You’ll be the first person dead, you great lumbering lout.”

“I’ll join,” says Josephine. “Though I will probably be the first person gone. I’m not very ruthless, but it should be fun.”

All eyes shift towards Cassandra, who has her arms folded.

“No,” she says, looking dour. “Don’t even ask.”

“You would be unstoppable!” Sera whines.

“I am not participating in this disturbing mockery of humanity’s worst sin.”

Varric flaps a hand at her. “Her majesty hates fun, we all know that. Let’s move onto the finer details.”

“I do not hate fun –”

“Where are the safe zones, Sera?”

“Bathroom,” Krem says immediately. “I’m not going to cower in fear every time I have to take a shit.”

“Bed,” says Josephine. “I need to be able to sleep at night.”

“The library, so we don’t get banned and so I can study,” Ellana adds.

“Nerd,” Sera throws in with an eye roll.

They negotiate, more drunkenly as the night rolls on, the terms of engagement. Your target has to be alone when you kill them, they can’t be naked, if they run and reach a safe zone you have to leave for at least an hour. By the time they stumble back home, though, it doesn’t feel real. Ellana crawls into bed with a bottle of painkillers, ready for the massive headache waiting for her when she wakes up.

It definitely feels real two days later when she’s clinging to her favorite oak tree in the quad, plastic knife between her teeth, watching for Krem. While Josephine was in the shower, Ellana stole her phone to text Krem about meeting up in front of Aeducan Hall. She knows he won’t be stupid enough to actually meet up without scouting the place first, so he’ll take the back way just to be sure Josephine isn’t waiting for him with a knife.

Which brings him right past this tree.
She can’t take full credit for the ruse because Sera hacked Varric’s phone to make it look like his editor needed to meet up downtown and then ambushed him on his way to his car.

(Varric was so impressed that he plans on adapting the scene into his next novel.)

The faint sound of Krem whistling grows louder as he gets closer and then he’s barely a foot away.

He looks up and shouts.

Shit!

Ellana leaps from her hold like a squirrel from one of Krem’s nightmares, landing hard on her knees in the dirt right behind him. Krem, stupidly fast because of Iron Bull’s godsdamn training, has already taken off like a shot towards the student union and the safety bathrooms. Ellana tears after him, knife clutched in her palm. Her long legs catch up to him before he can reach the sidewalk and she slams into him like a linebacker, sending them both to the ground. Knees locked on either side of him, Ellana presses the plastic knife to his throat.

“You die.”

“Maker take you, you crazy fucking bitch.”

Ellana cackles as she slides off of him. “Aww, Kremmy. Don’t be mad at me. You just weren’t fast enough. It happens.”

Krem sits up, his chest heaving and his eyes wild. She’s starting to think she just gave him the scare of his life.

“Godsdamn it, Ellana, my clothes are all muddy. I have to go change. Tell Josie I’ll be late.”

“Josie never sent that text; I did, to lure you out.”

Krem leans his head back and looks at the sky like he’s praying for something. “Then you’re buying me lunch. You owe me that much.”

“I don’t owe you shit,” she says. “But you look a little traumatized so I’ll get you a burger.”

“So who’s left?” Krem asks, coating a french fry in about three ounces of mustard. Ellana watches him in somewhat morbid fascination. Even though she’s watched Krem eat fries and mustard for two years now, it never fails to disgust yet intrigue her.

“Hold on, I’ll check.”

Ellana has been texting Solas a running commentary on the game so far. Even though he initially denounced it as childish, he keeps asking her for updates.

“Other than me, it looks like . . . Iron Bull, Zev, and Sera.”

“Well, good luck with Zev. I’ve been trying to figure out how to ambush that bastard since we started. You know, no one has seen him since the game started. Yet he’s supposedly going to all his classes.”

“Just break into his apartment,” Ellana says, swiping a french fry.
“Sure. And then get arrested and expelled.”

“That only happens if you’re really bad at it.”

“I hope you’re also really good at evading whatever horrifying booby traps Sera has rigged up in that place.”

Ellana leans back in her chair. “Oh yeah. Shit. Forgot about that.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Ellana doesn’t know a lot about picking locks – just breaking them or the door or the window nearby – so she heads to Dorian’s office. She figures she’s safe there since he’s dead, but she locks the door behind her just in case.

“Have you killed that bastard yet?” Dorian asks, not looking away from his computer.

“No, I’ve got Zev,” she says. “I need you to teach me how to lockpick so that I can break into his apartment.”

“No dice on that one, I’m afraid.” Dorian spins in his chair to face her. “Bull already tried to get Sera. Apparently both she and Zevran are constantly naked in their apartment.”

Ellana grimaces. “Seriously?”

Dorian laughs. “Bull got quite the eyeful. And a bucket of something gooey all over his shirt. The stain will not come out and it smells like a dead animal.”

Motherfucking Creators.

“How do the two of them even get into their own apartment?”


Ellana leans back into her chair and groans.

“Look, you took down Krem like a rampaging war nug, so subtlety is not your best art,” says Dorian. “But Zevran is smart and he plays the long game. I would wait until he came to you.”

“So we can duke out, assassin versus assassin, like a movie?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know if I can bet on him not getting eliminated before then.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate him. He’s very intelligent, even if he doesn’t show it.”

“Yeah, you’re a shining example of how being smart at math makes you good at this game.”

Dorian just raises an eyebrow. “And on that note, you can see yourself out. I’m trying to craft the perfect equation that will make my students cry.”
– Solas 8:35am

Status Report?

– Ellana 8:35am

Still alive. No idea how long. Iron bull was jumped at 3 this morning and everyone is freaking out because we all thought he would win.

– Solas 8:36am

That is quite a plot twist, as Varric would say.

– Ellana 8:36am

Yeah, Zev broke into the gym while he was boxing and took him out

Pray for me. I might die of paranoia before anything else

So, last night’s upheaval has so totally fucked with Varric’s betting pool that he spent all night figuring out the new odds. No one expected the Bull to go down so soon. Now that just leaves either Zev or Sera who’s got her name.

Ellana doesn’t know which one is worse.

Ellana 1:23 pm

walk me to class? I have coding with Sera and she might try to ambush me

Krem 1:23 pm

20 bucks

Ellana 1:23 pm

are you fucking kidding me?

Krem 1:24 pm

dead serious. my protection qualifies as a service and therefore I should get paid

Ellana 1:25 pm

take your service and shove it up your ass
Ellana runs to class like she’s fifteen minutes late to a final even though she’s actually several minutes early. Too early, she finds out, as she skids into the classroom to see not a soul in there, not even Blackwall.

It’s perfect for an ambush.

Even though she’s alone, Ellana ducks and weaves between the desks and crawls behind the professor’s desk. She sits there for several minutes, hardly daring to breathe, straining with her ears to hear for any sign of Sera.

Footsteps approach and Ellana tenses for a moment, but they sound too heavy to belong to Sera and there’s no accompanying buzz of the death/electro/house music leaking from her headphones.

A shadow looms over her, blocking out the buzzing fluorescent lighting above.

“Can I help you?” Blackwall asks, one eyebrow raised.

“I – uh.”

Ellana must look like a lunatic hiding behind his desk.

“I was looking for the back of an earring,” she says, hastily getting to her feet. “But I guess I lost it in another class.”

“Uh huh,” he says slowly.

He stares at her suspiciously until Ellana takes her seat. As the other students start filtering in, Blackwall discreetly checks under his desk and around his podium before he sets down his laptop and turns the projector on.

“What is he doing?” Sera leans over and whispers.

“I don’t know.”

“I haven’t fucked with him in a long time. I’m saving that for his birthday.”

Class goes on as usual, except Ellana twitches every time Sera reaches for a pencil or her laptop charger or her phone. Not that she could knife Ellana in the middle of class, but it’s destroying her nerves to sit next to the person plotting her symbolic murder.

“Hey, Krem just texted me to meet up for lunch,” Sera says, packing up her laptop. “The new barbeque place just opened up across the street from Hamblin Hall.”

“I’ll meet you there,” says Ellana. “I, uh, have to talk to Blackwall first about an assignment.”

Sera shrugs. “Meet us in ten? I’ll text Kremmers.”

She slings her backpack over her shoulder and plugs her headphones in before waving goodbye.
Ellana doesn’t buy Sera’s nonchalance for a second.

*Ellana 3:02 pm*

*Hey im gonna be late for lunch.*

*Krem 3:02 pm*

*Um what lunch*

*Ellana 3:03 pm*

*Sera said we were meeting up with you at the bbq place*

*Krem 3:03 pm*

*Dude that place doesn’t open for like another month*

*Ellana 3:03 pm*

*I fucking knew it*

As the other students leave, Ellana approaches Blackwall.

“This is going to sound really weird,” she says, “but if I pay you ten bucks, could I hide in your office for like, twenty minutes?”

“You’re right, that is really weird,” he says. “I’m going to need something more compelling than ten dollars.”

“You’d be saving my life. Is that compelling enough?”

His eyebrows raise in understanding. “You’re playing the Assassin Game, aren’t you? Is that why you were hiding behind my desk?”

“You know about it?”

Blackwall waves his hand dismissively. “The kids play it every semester. I’ve seen a hundred different versions – black pieces of paper, foam swords, glitter bombs. At least one kid gets arrested every semester for streaking.”

“Well, Sera’s got my name.”

“That is a terrifying prospect. Alright. Come on. You could use a few pointers with your coding anyway.”

Blackwall discusses some of her homework assignments as they head to his office. Ellana has
improved a lot since last year, but she still makes small mistakes. When they reach his office he keeps
the door cracked and offers her a soda from the mini fridge behind his desk.

“I hope this doesn’t sound too offensive, but you don’t seem like someone who is normally in this
major,” he says.

“How so?”

“Maker, please do not take this the wrong way, but I can smell the Liberal Arts all over you.”

Ellana laughs. “Yeah. You got me.”

“Which one is your preference?”

“I like all of it – art, music, literature. But history is my favorite, especially my own because it’s so
fragmented. I like piecing things together.”

“So why are you in coding?” he asks. “You’re very intelligent, but I can tell you’re heart’s not in it.”

“I like it,” she says. “I like learning new things and it’s really useful. But no, I don’t love it like Sera
does.”

“Very few love it like Sera does. She’s definitely . . . unique.”

“Dorian – I mean, Dr. Pavus, my adviser – was pretty pissed that I chose computer science, but
there’s not much of a job market for history majors and I’m not getting an expensive education just
so I can be poor when I leave here.”

“Makes sense,” he says. “The market out there is slim and the competition brutal at times. But
computer science careers can be difficult, tedious, exhausting. If you don’t love it, you might be in
for a rough time.”

Ellana shrugs. “It’s better than having a useless degree and working a minimum wage job.”

“You got me there.”

“So what’s your story?” she asks. “You don’t seem like much of a computer coder yourself.”

“Oh? What is it that I do seem like?”

“The kind of adult that calls IT because they can’t find the “any” key.”

Blackwall laughs at that. “It’s the beard, isn’t it?”

“Maybe? It does lend you a very fatherly air.”

“I’m not sure if I should take offense to that.”

“I call it like I see it.”

“Well, Sera has said worse, so I suppose I can let it slide. My story is long and full of regrets and
stupidity. But the short version is that I used to be a criminal. And when that finally caught up with
me, I was given a choice to work for the government or go to prison – so I chose the government.
And then I retired here.”

“To train fledgling criminals?” Ellana asks somewhat ironically.
The corner of Blackwall’s lips curve up. “To show people like Sera that she has other options than
the ones that will hurt her later.”

“That’s quite noble of you,” she says with a soft smile of her own.

He shrugs. “I have a lot to make up for.”

“How much of this does Sera know about?”

“Some of it. Not all of it. You know Sera – the second she thinks you’re trying to morally guilt her
into anything she shuts down and runs away.”

Ellana nods. “Yeah, she’s not one for after school specials. It’s good you’re looking out for her.”

After a little while, she deems it safe to head back out. Sera has a short attention span and she would
have wandered off by now. Hell, she probably pretended to give Ellana such an obvious set up just
to see her paranoid. Even so, Blackwall graciously offers to escort her back to the apartment, but
Ellana declines.

“If I know Sera, she’s probably just stuffing her face right now in the student union,” Ellana says.
“I’ll be alright. Thanks for covering for me.”

“Any time,” says Blackwall. “And tell Sera that she’s not the only one with plans for my birthday.”

There’s a familiar blonde head of hair sitting under her favorite tree, but it doesn’t belong to Sera.
Zevran lies on his back in the grass, holding a book up to block the late afternoon sun.

No one has seen so much of a glimpse of Zevran this whole game (at least, outside his apartment and
fully clothed). It’s almost too good to be true.

*Let him come to you* Dorian said.

“Kind of bold for you to be out here like this,” she says.

He lazily flips a page.

“I can only go so long without basking in the sunlight. Let them come.”

Let them come indeed. Ellana’s hand snakes into her back pocket for the knife . . .and comes up
empty.

*Shit*. She left the knife in her other jeans. How? How can she survive this long just to miss the only
chance she’ll get because of such a stupid, rookie mistake?!

“Are you still in the game?” he asks.

Thinking fast, Ellana chooses her best option and lies her ass off. “Nah. Sera ambushed me right
before class. I tried to get their early, but she was hiding behind Blackwall’s desk.”

The corner of his mouth lifts up. “She is both devious and relentless. Be proud you survived so
long.”

“I guess. Besides, I have a feeling she’ll bring back the Murder game again and I’ll get my revenge.
What’s your secret?”

“A lack of clothing and skipping all my classes. But I’ve gotten bored staying in the apartment. Not
to mention rather chilly.”

“Seriously, you skipped all your classes?”

Zevran shrugs. “I emailed my professors and told them I had the flu. They emailed my homework assignments.”

“Huh.” Brilliant, actually. Ellana might have to tuck that away for later. Right now, though, a plan starts building in her mind.

“Mind if I sit here,” she asks. “You’re right, winter is coming soon and we won’t get many more days like this.”

“Only if I can rest my head against your thick and beautiful thighs.”

“Deal.”

Ellana sinks down into the grass and Zevran scoots up to rest his head on her leg. It really is a beautiful day, the late fall sun bright and gold, the campus trees a riot of color. For several minutes they sit in companionable silence, broken only by occasional bird song and the rustle of pages. As long as she stays with Zevran, Sera can’t get to her. And as long as Sera keeps her distance, Zevran is hers. She could kill him now, but in the wide open quad, he has the possibility of out running her.

Instead, she’s going to lead him back to the apartment and kill him there, trapped against the door with no way out.

“I think I’m going to head back,” she says. “Do you want to hang in the apartment with me for a while? As long as you’re with me, Sera can’t get you.”

Zevran tilts his head and thinks a moment. “That is a gracious offer. I think I will take you up on it. Our apartment is only three floors above yours. I could climb up into my bedroom window with her none the wiser.”

“Perfect.” Ellana hides a smirk as she gets to her feet. She holds out a hand and helps Zevran up and then offers him the crook of her arm, which he gladly accepts.

They reach her apartment without incident. Ellana sees no sign of Sera, no whisper of her headphones, no barely contained snorts of giggles. Still, she heads for the backdoor instead of the front, Zevran following behind her like a puppy. Once she gets inside, she’ll put something on the TV and excuse herself to the bathroom to grab the knife. Her other jeans should still be lying crumpled in the floor by the shower, actually –

She has a split second to feel his body heat press against her back before his hand reaches around her shoulders to press the plastic knife at her throat.

“Oh Ellana,” he breathes against the shell of her ear. “You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you?”

Ellana stares down at his arm, too shocked to be angry. “What? What? But – Sera --”

Zevran chuckles warmly against her. “I got Sera this morning, right before her first class.”

So he knew she was lying the whole time.

“Gods damnit,” Ellana hisses, shoving him back and turning around to face him. “I was so fucking
Zevran laughs. “You made a valiant effort, mi amor, but you have too much honor to be a good liar. I have to ask, though, why did you wait until we were back here? You had a perfect opportunity while we laid in the grass.”

“I didn’t have the knife on me,” she admits. “I left it in my other jeans pocket.”

“Oh, Ellana.”

“I know! I know. I was stupid.”

He chuckles her under the chin. “You must always be prepared for violence, my friend.”

“Thanks,” she says somewhat biting. “I’ll remember that for next time.”

“Be sure you do. Now, I believe there is a considerable sum of money that awaits me from my sister’s red friends. Farewell, my worthy opponent.”

He kisses her hand before scaling up to the balcony above her. Ellana watches him climb gracefully up to his apartment three floors up, like some kind of wall climbing lizard, before ducking inside her apartment and collapsing on the couch to wallow in her defeat.

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: Today I died.

Have you ever heard of the Murder game? Apparently colleges all over Thedas play some form of it and the goal is to eliminate everyone in the group until you are the last one left “alive”. We had to kill each other via plastic knives to the throat or stomach and I was so fucking close to winning. It was down to Zev, Sera, and me and I forgot my stupid fucking knife in my other jeans and Zev jumped me right before I was unlocking the door to my apartment.

And I was so focused on trying to fool him long enough to grab it from the bathroom that I didn’t even think of the possibility that he had my name and was going to kill me. That and the fact that Zev is so stupidly chill and likable that it’s hard to imagine him tricking me like that, even though I should have known better because he took down Iron Bull and fucked up Varric’s betting pool.

Anyway, the game was really weird and definitely fucked up, but I loved it. And after I died I went into the living room and I . . . had the urge to tell you about it.

I hate to admit it, but I miss telling you things. I miss knowing that I have someone out there who waits to hear from me. So you might hear from me every now and again, if that’s still okay.

Yours,

Ellana
I had made my peace that I would never hear from you again, so imagine my surprise and relief to see your missive sitting in my inbox. I will always be happy to hear from you, Ellana, in whatever capacity you see fit.

Though I have to admit that your subject line was a little jarring. Your first line following that was not much better.

Yes, I have heard of the Murder game. I saw it played when I was in University though I did not have the guts to join in. At the time it sounded rather distasteful, but I think now it might be fun. If you play another round, I wish you all the luck in killing your friends. (I hope the University does not monitor these emails too closely).

Your friend,

Fen’Harel

Ellana 6:34 pm

that gd motherfucking Zev

Solas 6:35 pm

Dead? But you were so close!

Ellana 6:35 pm

1. im so pissed. Thats okay, we’ll play another round and im gonna fuck him up

Solas 6:36pm

That’s the spirit.

Ellana 6:36 pm

so that was my day how was yours?

To Ellana’s surprise, Cassandra shows up for one of their archery meetings, already toying with one of the bows when Ellana and Sera show up.

Sera’s eyes get wide at the sight of Cassandra holding the bow up and pulling back on it, letting loose an imaginary arrow.

“Andraste’s tits,” she whispers, grabbing hold of Ellana’s arm.

“Keep it in your pants,” Ellana whispers back before waving at Cassandra.
“I hope I’m not intruding,” Cassandra says. “I saw some of your videos and I’ve always been curious about weapons.”

By now Varric has recruited several other random students that join in. It’s not an exclusive club by any means.

“Not at all,” says Ellana.

“Yeah, spread the love,” Sera adds.

“You made it, Princess!”

Varric strolls up to them, hands in his pockets. The air is starting to turn chilly and archery club has only a couple more meetings before pausing for the winter.

(They are banned from ever using the gyms again).

“I said I would.” Cassandra looks slightly offended.

“You girls can go ahead.” Varric waves them off before turning his attention to Cassandra. “Have you ever fingered a bow before?”

Sera chokes on air.

“No, never. Will that be a problem?”

“Absolutely not. Sera’s never fingered a bow in her life and now she shoots like a pro.”

“Some people are just born to finger bows,” Sera adds, barely able to get it out without snickering.

Varric nods at her, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Exactly. But I’ll show you everything you need to know. The first thing you need is proper form . . .”

Ellana and Sera take their sweet time grabbing their preferred bows from the line up on the table and walking towards the targets. She feels vaguely like siblings spying on their dad’s new dinner date.

Varric positions Cassandra’s stance before positioning her fingers around the bow. She blithely allows this, applying her serious attention to detail even in this insignificant thing. She might be too oblivious to notice the way that Varric’s fingers linger over hers, the close range at which he stands beside her as he helps her aim the target, but neither Ellana nor Sera miss it.

“I think you have competition,” she whispers to Sera.

“Pffft. I’ve known that since day one,” says Sera. “Short-stack better hurry up, though. I’ve hung back as a professional courtesy, yeah? I could get my fingers in her bow if I wanted.”

None of Cassandra’s arrows land in the target and Ellana doesn’t think it’s because she’s never shot a bow.

Holding the spare key in her mouth, Ellana props open the door with her foot as she struggles with the groceries in her hands.

“They were out of your tea, but I grabbed you everything else,” she says.
“I brought him his tea, don’t worry.”

Ellana jerks so hard at the new voice that the keys fall from her startled mouth. A dwarven woman is cuddled up on Varric’s couch with a mug in her hand.

“Uh . . . who are you?”

It comes out ruder than she intends, but Ellana has never seen this woman in her life. Varric has a lot of friends all over the world, but he never said anyone was coming to visit. She could be interrupting a robbery. In fact, she’s slowly dipping her hand into her pocket for her phone –

“Varric, honey, you might want to get in here before your friend calls the police,” the dwarf calls out, not sounding very alarmed at the prospect.

“You’re lucky she didn’t suplex you,” he says, before appearing out from the hallway. “Ellana, meet Bianca.”

Bianca gives her a little wave.

“Is she your sister or something?” Ellana asks.

Varric cringes while Bianca throws her head back and laughs.

“Maker’s balls, no,” he says. “Bianca is a . . . special friend of mine. I would have given you a heads-up, but she likes to drop in unannounced.”

“I keep him on his toes,” Bianca adds, a smirk curving up the sides of her lips.

Varric winks at her. “That you do.”

They stare at each other with the heaviness that generally proceeds heavy petting. It’s almost as if they both forgot she was in the room. She carries the groceries over to the counter.

“I’ll just leave these here,” she says.

Varric tears his gaze from his “special friend,” and nods at her. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll take care of it. We’ll try again later this week.”

“Sure,” she says. “Nice to meet you, Bianca.”

Bianca smiles. “You too! Varric’s told me so much about you. We should all go get dinner sometime.”

Ellana pastes on a smile. “Sounds great. See you later.”

She is grateful to get away.

That moment bothers her the rest of the day, and she worries it like a splinter. She can’t explain why, but she does know this: Whoever the hell Bianca is, Ellana doesn’t like her. Something about her just feels off.

Maybe it was the way she had so obviously made herself at home in Varric’s apartment like she owned the place. Maybe it was how she didn’t bother to introduce herself before calling for Varric, as if Ellana was the intruder, and the side-stepping Varric did instead of explaining anything.
Maybe it was the look they shared, so heavy with shared history and intimacy.

That’s what jars her the most. In that look it was painfully clear that Varric loves this person. Yet if she’s that important to him, why hadn’t Ellana heard about her before?

In the three years that Ellana’s known Varric, he’s never had a class that started before noon. So when he shows up the next morning at eight with a dozen donuts, Ellana almost thinks she’s still dreaming.

“Are you going to let me in or are you going to stand there catching flies?” he asks.

Ellana steps back to let him in.

“Varric, did your alarm clock break?”

Varric sets the donuts on the coffee table.

“Are you looking a gift horse in the mouth? Because I can take these somewhere else.”

Ellana snatches a donut before he can say anything else. As she crams it in her mouth, Varric paces a little in front of the coffee table, looking uncharacteristically awkward.

“So, about Bianca,” he says, scratching the back of his head. “I’d appreciate it of you didn’t blast her picture all over social media or gossip about it to all your friends.”

She can only stare at him incredulously as she chews. “Varric, we have all the same friends. And you’re on social media more than I am!”

“Okay, point taken,” he concedes, looking a little contrite. “It’s just that . . . her being here is kind of a secret.”

“What is she, a spy?”

“No, she’s married.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Maker’s balls, Ellana, do I have to spell it out for you? Bianca’s my girlfriend, lover, fuck buddy – pick one.”

She has never seen Varric so agitated, and yet she has little sympathy for him.

“You’re dating a married woman? What the hell, Varric!”

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s a little more complicated than what your scandalized naivety is thinking.”

Ellana crosses her arms. “Yeah? How so?”

Varric sighs and takes a seat on the couch. “Bianca and I have known each other since we were children. Been in love with each other since then, too. But dwarven marriages are mostly arranged, especially if you’re from a powerful family like hers, and her parents had other plans for her than . . . me.”
“So you sneak around?”

“After she got engaged, we were forbidden from ever contacting each other. So yeah, we sneak around. It’s mostly texts and emails, honestly, but every so often she finds time to see me. But even after all this time, her family still watches her and if they find out that she’s been to see me --”

“She would get hurt?”

“I would get hurt.”


He shrugs. “It is what it is. Do me a favor and pass this around to the rest of the gang?”

“Sure.”

He snatches a donut for himself before heading out. As much as she loves donuts, Ellana doesn’t touch the rest of them. It feels too much like a bribe.

For someone who’s supposed to lay low, Bianca shows up everywhere. She’s getting Varric’s latte in the coffee shop, giggling over romance novel covers in the bookshop downtown, and muscling in every game of pool at the Hanged Man.

“You’re pretty good at this,” Cassandra reluctantly concedes after Bianca sinks four balls in a row.

“She’s as good of a shark as you are,” Varric says, chuckling.

“Now, Varric, I have never been dishonest about my skill as a pool player,” Bianca says with a grin. “I’ve just made sure I was the only sober player. Like that time in Ostwick. Remember that game in Ostwick?”

“How could I forget? By the end of the night you were the only fully clothed player left.”

“It wasn’t even strip pool!”

“You just have that effect on people.”

He and Bianca clink their beer bottles together.

“There’s another Bianca Varric can’t keep his hands off,” Sera says after a couple of beers. “Any relation to you?”

“Oh lord, you still haul that rusty thing around?” Bianca says, nudging Varric with her shoulder.

“Rusty! She’s still as beautiful as she ever was. I keep her well oiled.”

“I bet you do.” Bianca grins. She turns back to Sera. “I made that for Varric as a gift a long, long time ago.”

“You made it?”

“Bianca’s an engineer. One of the best in the Free Marches --”

“The best in the Free Marches, dear. So much better than that Branka hack --”
“Sorry, hear hear, the best engineer in the Free Marches. She’s designed all kind of machines, but my crossbow is one of a kind.”

“You didn’t patent it?” Cassandra asks.

Bianca shrugs. “Why would I when we have guns now? I made it to see if it could be done. Really, I was just playing around. Varric liked it so much I gave it to him and then he turned around and nearly killed his brother with it.”

“He shouldn’t taken the last slice of my birthday cake.”

“You would shoot Bertrand for breathing wrong.”

“You are absolutely right.”

She drops more hints of their past throughout the night, inside jokes that only she and Varric laugh at, stories they half finish for each other, and each one Varric tries to play it cool, but he tracks her every movement – every lean against the bar, every graceful swing of her drink, every jutted hip when she takes a shot, every slide of her hand on the pool stick. She wants to be seen by him.

Krem and Josephine have been making bedroom eyes at each other all night, so Ellana catches a ride of with Dorian back to the apartment.

“Is this your first rodeo with her?” Ellana asks.

“With who – Bianca? Oh, no. Though it’s been about three years since the last time.”

“What do you think of her?”

Dorian takes a moment to reply, his thumbs tapping on the steering wheel. “The visits themselves aren’t bad. It’s the aftermath I don’t look forward to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Varric is always a little . . .sad after she leaves. He makes a big show about having accepted that they can never be together in a conventional way, but you can tell that it hurts him every time she goes. I hate to say it, but he pines.”

“Huh.”

Varric doesn’t seem the pining type, with his jokes and casual acceptance of life’s tragedies. But there is no denying the way he looked at Bianca. Though she’s also remembering the way his fingers lingered on Cassandra’s hands during archery club.

“I thought he liked Cassandra, but I guess I was reading into things,” she says.

“You’re not the only one, darling. But Bianca’s claws have been in Varric for far too long for him to seriously consider someone else.”

“Doesn’t anyone ever say anything to him about it?”

“What good would it do, Ellana? He wouldn’t listen. They’ve been doing this for decades; they’re too far in it. Sometimes you have to let people make their own mistakes.”
Ellana folds her arms and leans against the window.

It’s official. She definitely hates Bianca.

Bianca stays until the snow starts blowing in before she decides to head back to sunny Val Royeaux. Varric arranges some kind of last hurrah at the Hanged Man, sending out a group text that Ellana doesn’t answer.

He corners her on the way home from the cafeteria. Josephine and Krem are out on a dinner date, so Ellana had a quiet meal with just her and a book.

“Hey, do you want a ride down to the Hanged Man tomorrow?”

“I think I’m going to skip on out this one,” Ellana says, shoving her hands in her pockets.

“Really?” His eyebrows raise up. “You never skip out on the Hanged Man.”

“I have a lot of books I want to read.”

“You have the rest of winter break to read, Ellana. Come on, everyone will be there.”

“I don’t feel like it, Varric! Can you just drop it?”

She picks up her stride, but Varric catches up with her easily.

“Do you have some kind of a problem with Bianca?”

Creators there is really no avoiding this, is there? “Do you really want to know the answer to that question?”

“So you do have one. So what the fuck is it?”

He plants himself right in front of her, arms crossed, looking uncharacteristically angry under the streetlamp.

“Sorry, I didn’t know I wasn’t allowed to not like your girlfriend. I’m not allowed to talk about her or take pictures of her or acknowledge her entire existence, but godsdamn I better like her, huh?”

“What the hell has she ever done to you?”

“It’s what’s she’s done to you! It’s what you’ve let her do. Stringing you along just enough so that you’re always waiting for her when she gets bored of her husband just so she can waltz back out of your life when the weather doesn’t suit her. The fact that you think it’s okay to— to survive on letters and memories and a fling every once in a blue moon, knowing you’re second best, while she lives it up with her rich ass husband and her socially acceptable marriage, not giving a single fuck about you. And the fact that everyone knows you have feelings for Cassandra, but you’d rather have this— shadow of a relationship than something real. It’s fucking pathetic, Varric.”

She has never seen Varric angry. It looks wrong on him, twists his face into something almost unrecognizable. Ellana dines on anger pretty much everyday, but for Varric it’s like poison.

“You have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.” He jabs his finger at her, voice low and gravely. He doesn’t shout and somehow it’s worse. “You’re a child. You’ve never dated anyone, you’ve never fallen in love, you’ve never had your heart broken. You don’t know shit about
dwarven culture or social expectations. You’re just mad because I’m not fulfilling your romantic fantasies that I never wanted anything to do with. Grow up, Ellana. The grown-up world outside Skyhold is a lot more complicated than you think it is. When you’ve figured that out, come talk to me.”

And then he leaves just as quickly as he appeared.

Ellana’s anger can be dangerously seductive. It always feels so satisfying– in the moment at least– to call someone out on their bullshit. It makes her feel powerful and it’s hard to apologize for when she knows she’s right.

But as she lets herself into her apartment, hands still shaking, she doesn’t feel powerful. She doesn’t feel like some almighty giver of hard truths. She feels afraid.

Because every huge fight she’s ever had with someone, they’ve never recovered from it. Mihris. Dany. Her clan. Some fights you can’t come back from and she thinks she and Varric might have just had one.

She doesn’t want to lose him, but she can’t make herself apologize for something she isn’t sorry for. She feels sick all night.

For the next few days, it’s like Ellana has fallen in some weird alternate universe where she never met Varric. If they cross paths on the sidewalk or in the coffee shop, they say nothing to each other. They don’t even acknowledge each other’s presence.

Ellana hates it.

“You said something to him, didn’t you?”

Dorian nods over at Varric, who’s crossing the quad in the distance on his way to his office.

“He asked,” she says. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Lie.”

She gives him a look over his coffee cup. “Because I do that so well.”

“Point. Well, whatever you said, I haven’t seen him this angry in . . .well, never.”

That sick feeling starts curling up in her stomach again.

“The truth sucks sometimes,” she says, trying to ignore it. “I’m not sorry for what I said and I wouldn’t have had to say it he hadn’t made me.”

Dorian shrugs. “We’ll see, I suppose. This is new territory for me, I’ll admit. Varric doesn’t get angry very often.”

After a week, Ellana sits in the coffee shop alone, sipping a latte and trying figure out how to fix the mess that has become her and Varric.
Varric, I’m sorry I stuck my nose in your shitty relationship business.

Sorry I was blunt and rude about something you’re sensitive about?

Sorry that I’m the only one who cared enough to speak up?

She can’t quite swallow enough pride to admit that she was wrong. Sure, she shouldn’t have given her opinion in something that isn’t her business. Dorian said some people have to make their own mistakes and he’s right. She should have lied and kept it to herself rather than shoot off her mouth like she always does.

But what if Varric doesn’t accept anything less than for her to say that she was wrong about Bianca?

What if she can’t?

What if it doesn’t matter even if she was sorry?

She keeps getting flashes of that conversation with Mihris. He wasn’t angry with her. He didn’t hate her. He saved her from getting her ass beat by half the clan. But he had quietly and resolutely written her off. And somehow that was worse.

What if Varric has already decided that this friendship isn’t worth patching up?

As if her thoughts had summoned him, Varric walks through the doors of the coffee shop. Snow dots his hair and the long scarf that trails over his shoulder.

Instead of ordering and walking back out, Varric makes a beeline straight for her table.

“You.”

Ellana just stares at him. So many words rise up just to be caught in her throat.


He doesn’t wait for her to speak before pulling out a large manila envelope from his leather bag.

“I actually have it right here. It’s a rough draft, lot of errors, but I think I got the expression down. If you wanted to take a look at it.”

He sets it down on the table, hesitates for a moment, waiting for her to say something.

She doesn’t. She doesn’t know what she even would say.

“Well, tell me what you think when you get around to it,” he says, knocking the table lightly with his knuckles before walking away.

Dear Ellana

I’m a coward who prefers to write this kind of stuff down. Hell, you’ll probably just steal Sera’s lighter and burn it over the sink and that would be fair. On the off chance that you haven’t, I want to apologize.

Really, apologizing isn’t enough for this situation. I should grovel, buy you all the weird shit you like,
like organic produce and a new pair of hiking boots. Actually, don’t be surprised if either of those things end up on your doorstep.

But I am truly sorry for what I said to you. You were right. You nailed it, really. Intimacy scares the shit out of me. You saw it with Bianca, but once I get to a certain point with someone, I will do any stupid, pathetic, crazy thing they ask of me. I’m a lonely puppy begging someone to love it and once they do, I’ll follow them off the edge of a cliff. If you thought Bianca was bad, you should have seen me with Hawke back when we went to school together.

The kind of relationship I had with Bianca was easy because she knew me so well, but I didn’t have to do anything with her. I could love her from a distance, imagining myself as some kind of angsty, pining sap in one of Cassandra’s romances.

Me and Bianca have never really fit in a conventional relationship box, even when we were kids, so the fact that nobody ever seems to get us was normal for me. Of course it looks unfair to those on the outside. Bianca’s marriage was for her family business. Arranged marriages are common in dwarfen culture, and she didn’t love him at all. She actually ran away with me the night before her wedding to elope, but both of our families tracked us down and I got the ever living shit beat out of me. So, sneaking around with Bianca also became a sort of fuck you to her family for that.

But I’ve realized that in the intervening years, Bianca has moved on, while I’m stuck in this facsimile of what we used to have that she indulges in on a whim. It’s no longer a torrid, passionate affair of two lovers forced to be apart. It’s habit. It the equivalent of reminiscing over a beer about the glory days of your youth and goddamn that’s pathetic. I didn’t know I had gotten that bad.

And instead of thanking you for pulling my head out of my ass, I was a condescending bastard that implied you didn’t know jack shit because you were young and inexperienced, when you were just pointing out what everyone else had been thinking for years.

Really, I don’t know jack shit. I just pretend I do.

Thanks for looking out for me even when I don’t deserve it.

I hope I didn’t ruin everything.

Your friend,

Varric.

Ellana raps her knuckles hard on Varric’s door. It’s starting to snow outside, the cold making every knock on the door reverberate painful on her fingers, but she doesn’t stop until it swings open.

Varric stares up at her, dressed in a big bulky red sweater that still manages to drape enough to show a triangle of chest hair. He looks wary, eyes darting from her face and his letter she has clutched in her hand.

“You want to yell at me some more in person, that’s okay,” he says carefully.

Ellana bends down and wraps her arms tightly around him. Tears sting in her eyes and she presses her face into his shoulder.

“Oh,” he says. “Are you crying?”
“No,” Ellana lies fiercely.

His large hands rub carefully up and down her back as if she was a startled horse. “Hey. Hey, it’s okay. I’m sorry. It’s alright. I’m sorry.”

She nods, not trusting herself to speak.

“Come on inside, it’s cold as shit out here.”

Ellana doesn’t want to let him go, mainly because she is crying and doesn’t want him to know, but she straightens up and lets him lead her into his living room with a hand on her back.

“You want some tea or something?” he asks, sitting her down on the couch and looking a little panicked. “Maker’s balls, I didn’t think I would make you cry.”

“It’s not – it’s --” she takes a deep breath. “I’m just relieved. I thought you wouldn’t have anything to do with me after what I said.”

Varric just looks at her. “You thought one fight meant we weren’t friends anymore? Ellana, that’s not how friends work.”

“It is, in my experience.”

“Well, then you had shitty friends.” He takes a seat next to her. “Or at least you didn’t have friends that were me. I’m ride or die, Ellana. Even if you were totally wrong about Bianca, I would have gotten over it. I don’t just abandon people because they have different opinions than me, okay?”

She nods, wiping away more tears. They won’t stop coming, like drips from a leaky faucet.

“How about we order some take out and watch a movie, eh?” he says. “I owe you dinner anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

I have PLANS for Dorian/Solas disaster roommates fic, oh yes I do.

As always, anyone is welcome to talk to me at www.blarfkey.tumblr.com. I will be on that sinking ship until it's last dying day.
Chapter Notes

It's FINALLY here! This chapter was pulled out of my in tiny, agonizing chunks, haha. It was never supposed to take this long and I hope to God I never take this long again. Thanks for everyone who still continues to stick by me and this story. And thank you to my wonderful beta readers, who had to edit this mess of a chapter with a fine tooth comb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
From: sten_@skyholdu.edu
Subject: no subject

Serah Lavellan,

I am preparing a trip during the spring holidays to Val Royeaux Art Institute for members of the Skyhold Art Appreciation Society. Though you are not involved in this association, you nonetheless appreciate art to the same extent. Therefore I am extending the invitation to you. It will be three days not counting travel time. It will be educational. All travel, hotel, and admission expenses will be covered.

– Dr. Sten

Co-Head of Skyhold University Arts Department

To: sten_skyholdu.edu
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Re: Subject: no subject

Dr. Sten,

I would be honored to go on the trip to Val Royeaux. Thank you so much for considering me as a candidate. I am very appreciative. Please keep me updated if there are any forms to fill out or other requirements before the trip.

Yours,

Ellana Lavellan
Solas 4:34 pm
[attached image]
Our last sight of the Emerald Graves for the next couple of months

Ellana 4:35 pm
omg what why
did you run out of funding

Solas 4:36 pm
No, simply out of warm working conditions.
Merrill and I will be analyzing our artifacts in a lab
Bram has returned home with his assistant to teach for a semester

Ellana 4:37 pm
but you will be back right?

Solas 4:37 pm
Of course, after the spring thaw

Ellana 4:38 pm
good

Merrill’s face looks eerie illuminated only by the candle sitting on the windowsill before her.
“Can you see me okay?” Ellana asks, pushing her own candle a little to the left to catch the light.
“As much as you can see me,” she replies.
“I still can’t get over the camera on this thing.”
Merrill beams. “The first time I upgraded my phone, it felt like I was looking at a whole different
“Yeah. I had mine since I moved from the Dales, and it was old when I got it. I’m surprised it lasted as long as it did.”

It had started to break down during finals week, dropping calls, the battery plunging after a few minutes’ use, and withholding texts for hours before dumping them on her all at once. More than once she was tempted to just chuck the thing off a cliff, but settled instead on complaining about it to anyone who would listen to her in hopes that they had a magical fix that would prevent her from having to buy another one.

Technically she had the money to buy another phone if she wanted, but the indecision of so many options paralyzed her. Not to mention that the Dalish in her bucked at having to shell out hundreds of sovereigns on something that would work for only a few years before breaking down again.

Most people think the Dalish shun technology because they can’t figure out how to work it, but really it’s because her people are used to building things that last with their own hands, and technology just looks like nothing but a waste and a headache.

In the end it didn’t matter, because a small box came to her in the mail with the most up-to-date version of her old phone nestled inside.

Even though the return address was a nameless PO box, Ellana didn’t need three guesses to figure out where it came from. Though she was tempted to open up her email and yell at him for it, she loved the stupid phone too much to swallow that much hypocrisy. Putting her phones side by side was akin to putting Falon, Istie’s beat up old farm truck, next to Dorian’s sleek, luxury sports car.

If her clan ever saw it, it would be one more way that she’d sold out to the shems, but being able to video call Merrill in high resolution makes the sting of that thought disappear.

“Is your window open?” Merrill asks. “You don’t want to set off the smoke alarms.”

“Yes,” Ellana lies and the cracks the window open. Her candle flame dances in the frigid air that creeps in underneath. She props the phone up carefully against the window sill, still paranoid about breaking it despite the life-proof case Varric insisted she get. “Ready?”

Merrill holds up a folded piece of a paper. “Ready!”

Ellana fishes her own paper out of her pocket. “Yep.”

“Okay. On three. One . . . two . . . three . . .”

Together they place their secrets in folded scrap paper in the candle and watch them burn. As is custom, they don’t reveal their secrets to each other – they are for Dirthamen’s eyes only, and he will guard them jealously. Merrill closes her eyes, her lips moving silently in a prayer of thanks, but Ellana watches her secret until it becomes nothing but black ash.

Even though it’s silly, even though there’s no watchful god to take the burden from her, she still feels relief and a sense that she is not alone.

“Dareth shiral,” says Merrill softly.

“Dareth shiral.”
I don’t know what I want to do with my life and I am running out of time.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Happy First Day!

Happy First Day! Thank you for the phone. I don’t remember complaining to you about it, but I’m sure everyone has heard me bitch about at some point in the last few weeks. I would argue that it was too expensive, there are other older models that wouldn’t cost as much and do the job just as well, but I know you wouldn’t listen to them.

And the phone is very pretty.

But if you think you have to bribe me with stuff to get back into my good graces or anything, don’t. One, it wouldn’t work anyway and two, you don’t need to. It’s in the past now.

I have to get ready for Varric’s First Day Eve party. I hope this new year brings you peace and happiness.

Dareth Shiral
Ellana

Ellana 11:50

hey old man are you still up?

Solas 11:51

I am indeed.

Ellana 11:51

I’m surprised!

Solas 11:51

I took a nap earlier, as old people are wont to do.

Ellana 11:52
Im at varrics new year party
there are so many people his apt can barely fit them all
hes thinking about moving it to the hanged man after midnight

Solas 11:53
Ah. I remember those parties.
Well, hearing about those parties.
Varric always invited me but I would rather stay in
I am not comfortable in crowds

Ellana 11:54
lol. the dalish kind of get rid of that through exposure therapy
all holidays are celebrated with the entire villages
and sometimes other villages too

“ Who the hell is everybody texting?” Varric demands. “It’s five minutes till midnight!”
Ellana and Sera look guiltily up from their phones.

“ Solas,” she says, waving the phone in the air. “He said he never came to one of your parties.”

Varric’s eyes light up.

“ Chuckles? He’s still up? I thought he spent every New Year’s falling asleep with a book on his
head. Tell that bastard he needs to come back soon; he still owes me five sovs.”

He turns to Sera. “And who is more entertaining right now than Krem trying to teach Cassandra
what a meme is, huh?”

Sera jerks her phone down and stuffs it in her pocket with lightning speed. “Nobody. I mean – your
mom!”

Her cheeks are red, though Ellana can’t tell whether it’s from an actual blush or just the stuffy, warm
heat of the apartment.

Varric gives Ellana a speculative, side-eyed look.

Ellana 12:00 am
happy first day!
Solas 12:00 am

Happy First Day, Ellana

Ellana 12:03 am

lol we sent that at the same time
and its happy new year from both me and varric
he called you chuckles?
And he says you owe him five bucks

Solas: 12:04 am

The nickname is supposed to be ironic
because I don’t find his ridiculous puns funny
And I paid him his money
He was just too drunk to remember it.

Ellana 12:04 am

did YOU actually participate in one of his crazy bets?

Solas 12:05 am

It was a game of cards, actually.

Ellana 12:05 am

O.O
what game???

Solas 12:06 am

Diamondback
I prefer chess, but occasionally he can talk me into a quick round
Give him my regards and tell him
tell him I miss his company, on rare occasion.

Ellana 12:07 am
d’awwwwww
you do have friends

Ellana behaves herself at the Hanged Man so she can remember everything with as much clarity as
she can. Next year is the last time she will attend a Varric New Year’s Party. It’s the kind of thought
that keeps whispering in her ear more and more often. Time is a runaway halla, and it slips through
Ellana’s grip faster with every semester.

So she savors each moment – games of pool, Josephine’s giggles, Zevran’s outrageous comments,
Varric’s bawdy songs. She takes pictures of everyone, whether they like it or not.

The only thing off is Sera, who stays glued to her phone most of the night. That itself isn’t out of
place for her – but the wide grin that slips across her face every so often definitely is.

Ellana sneaks a picture of it and sends it to Zevran.

Ellana 2:54 am
what is happening???

Zevran 2:56 am
I think she is flirting.

Ellana 2:59 am
with who???????

Zevran 3:00 am
Your guess is as good as mine

To: fen_harel@mail.com
from: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subject: Sera

There is definitely something up with Sera. She keeps giggling at her phone, except it’s never followed by flashing us a meme that will haunt our dreams later. Actually, she’s gotten really secretive over her phone, texting while keeping it hidden in her hoodie pocket, putting in a passcode that’s like a zillion letters and numbers, all random.

And when we’re in between classes or eating or on the Quad, she keeps looking around like she’s trying to find someone.

I think she has a secret girlfriend. Which, if it is a secret girlfriend, I don’t know why she would try to hide it from us. She’s so in-your-face about everything else.

But Zevran and I are on the case, so I will keep you updated on our investigation.

Yours,

Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: fen_harel@tmail.com

Re: Subject: Sera

Perhaps your friend is afraid. I have found that most people with the most devil-may-care attitude about what others think in fact care the most. She could fear your judgment, or the vulnerability that comes with a new relationship, or looking like a fool if it doesn’t work out after only a brief time together.

I would advise, if it’s not too bold to do so, that you allow her to admit her relationship to you when she is ready. Otherwise, you risk breaking her trust.

Yours,

Fen’Harel

P.S. I haven’t heard much on the subject of your classes. Are your math classes still challenging? Do you still take art classes with Dr. Sten? How have you settled in with coding? You do not have to answer if I’m intruding, and I enjoy hearing about your friends, but I am curious about your academic life.

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Re: re:subject: Sera

Of course I take art with Dr. Sten. The thought of what would happen if I didn’t is too terrifying to even consider. I’m also taking technical writing, which is so much more boring than Varric’s writing classes, but it’s required (bleh).
Math is...still not my best. But Dorian was right, taking that stupid pre-cal class helped a lot and last semester I took part two with him and it was hard but it wasn’t the nightmare I had last year. I just think I’ve whined enough about it and I don’t like talking about it. This semester I have Mathematical Foundations of Computing and it’s all about proofs so far, which I kind of like, actually, though from the groaning of my classmates, I’m the only one.

Sera is still in my coding classes. I’m starting to think it’s not a coincidence but she already knows just about everything so I think she’s just using it as an excuse to hang out. She was also in my Electricity and Magnetism class, but once she found out we weren’t, like, exploding stuff with bottled lightning or whatever, she dropped out.

I’ve also got a Dwarven Literature class. I read some of their legends over the summer and I’m intrigued.

Yours,

Ellana

Ellana 3:34 pm
it’s definitely a secret gf
she skipped class!

Solas 4:14
The plot thickens

“Here. Take a gander at what I discovered last night.”

Zevran holds out his phone from across the table. Ellana puts down her spoon and squints at a profile of a cute red-headed dwarf girl, her round cheeks hosting a dusting of freckles.

“She’s cute. Your next conquest?”

“Not mine, no. Sera’s.”

“You found her?” Ellana hisses, snatching the phone out of his hand.

Dagna is twenty-eight, in the middle of her doctorate degree in organic chemistry. She’s a self professed lover of nerdy science jokes, and she loves watching scary movies, but never alone.

She seems perfectly sane and therefore nothing like who Ellana expected Sera to like.

“Are you sure this is her?” she asks. “How did you find her? Did you hack Sera’s phone?”

“Sera sleeps with her phone in her bra, so no. I did not. But she is not a sneaky as she thinks she is. I followed her into the library yesterday, and I saw the two of them meet up.”
“Sera went into the library of her own free will?”

Ellana expected her friend to never set foot in that building again after Krem’s ghost prank.

“Love can conquer any fear, *mi amor.*”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “I think calling Sera’s nerdy booty call ‘love’ is a bit overkill.”

“I beg to differ. Her secretive nature about this affair says otherwise.”

Sera in *love*? She can hardly picture it. Sera acts too much like a hyperactive fifteen-year-old to be capable of the maturity required for love. But Zevran knows his sister much better than she, so who knows.

But what would that even *look* like?

Several days pass by, and Sera reveals not even the slightest hint that she’s seeing someone. Coming from the girl who can’t bluff to save her life during Wicked Grace, this surprises both Ellana and Zevran.

She had almost given up when Zevran nudges her foot under the table at breakfast and nods ever so slightly at the cereal bar.

There stands Dagna, reaching futilely for one of the upper cereal dispensers. Ellana casts her gaze over to Sera, who’s wolfing down a sausage biscuit, totally oblivious. Zevran’s mouth curves dangerously upwards before he stands up abruptly.

“Excuse me. I see someone in need of my services,” he says.

Sera looks up and watches him saunter over to Dagna and gallantly help fill her cereal bowl. Dagna giggles at something he’s said, and in the corner of Ellana’s eye, Sera looks ready to commit murder. Ellana scoots her butter knife out of arm’s reach as Zevran returns to their table, smugness radiating off of him like a tangible aura.

“I offered her a seat here, but she declined,” he sighs, dropping into his chair rather theatrically. “I did get her phone number, though.”

“You did not,” Sera says immediately.

Zevran continues, pretending to oblivious to the tension simmering between him and Sera. “I’ve never been with a dwarf before, but she is quite adorable. I cannot resist her.”

“You keep your grimy, slutty hands off of her!”

“Why so?” He blinks. “She seemed more than happy at the prospect.”

The storm on Sera’s face is potent and definitely not funny anymore. She stands up and slams her fist on the table, leaning in close to Zevran’s face.

“If you so much as look at her,” she hisses, “I will rip your ball sacks off your body, tie them to a club, and beat you to death with them.”

She stalks out of the cafeteria before Zevran or Ellana have the chance to react.
“I . . . think I handled that poorly,” Zevran says in the ensuing awkward silence.

“Yep.” Ellana grabs the last slice of bacon from her place and gets up. “I’m going to check on her.”

“If you can find her. I think I will lie low for a while.”

“I think that’s smart.”

Ellana heads out of the side doors, hoping to catch Sera before she disappears, but at first there’s no sign of her anywhere. Then Ellana spies a flash of red holed up in one of the trees on the quad and she heads for it. The tree is one of the older, fatter oaks, with branches thick as a horse’s back. She scrambles up it with ease and straddles a limb opposite of Sera.

“So . . . that was weird,” Ellana offers.

Sere doesn’t look at her. “I’m not talking about it.”

“Is not talking your new thing now?”

Sera avoids the question by pulling her hood up over her head and pulling the strings so that it covers almost the entirely of her face.

“Look, you’re not as sneaky as you think you are,” Ellana tries. “You giggle randomly for no reason, you leave abruptly in the middle of shit, and you don’t tell anyone where you’re going. You text all the time. We all know you have a girlfriend, so like what is the big fucking secret?”

Sera says something, but the hoodie muffles her words.

“What?”

With a loud huff of frustration, Sera unties her hoodie and shakes herself out. “I said she’s not my girlfriend.”

Ellana gives her an exasperated look. “Oh come on, Sera --”

“I’m serious! We’re not, like, official or anything. We just hang out.”

“You’re covering her up like some kind of government conspiracy and you’re not even dating her?”

“Look it’s not – I don’t – It’s like – ugh!”

Sera buries her face in her hands for a moment. “It’s like this, okay? If I gush about her like a fucking git to all my friends then that it makes it real. And if it’s real then it matters. And if it matters then it hurts when she decides that I’m too weird or embarrassing or stupid to deal with anymore and I can’t handle that because I really really fucking like her! Are you happy!”?

Ellana has to take a moment to parse this all out. “So – you’re afraid that she’s not going to want you?”

“She’s getting her fucking doctorate in organic chemistry which is basically like magic it’s so fucking complicated, and here I am, just fucking around college and playing stupid pranks on people and not having a goddamn clue about what I’m going to do with myself. I mean, I can be fun, but fun isn’t serious and I don’t . . . I don’t know if I want fun forever.”

“Huh.”
Was this the same Sera that convinced Krem to slather acorns in peanut butter to stop the squirrels and makes rich clients dress in animal costumes and dance in the courtyard, spouting off about falling in love and settling down? It feels like Ellana fell into some alternate universe where Sera has a normal amount of sanity.

But that’s not really fair to Sera, now that she thinks about it. Beneath all the bluster and the pranks and the immature jokes (that are still funny) Sera has always hid a kernel of maturity, of someone who’s experienced the coldness of the universe at too young an age.

“Well, I’ve never been in love with someone,” Ellana says, “so I’m not great with advice in that area. But I don’t think avoiding rejection is worth not making meaningful connections with people. Sometimes that’s all you got, you know, after the universe fucks with you.”

Sera shrugs and says nothing. Ellana feels like she’s losing her, but she really doesn’t have a lot of wisdom to offer in this department. If Zevran hadn’t pissed Sera off so bad, he would be perfect for this conversation. Now Ellana’s got to muddle through it somehow.

“Look, we all know there is more to you than your . . . silliness. You’re smart, you care a lot about people, and you’ll stick up for anyone who can’t fight for themselves. If someone can’t see or understand all the different parts of you, then they’re not worth your time. But there is someone out there who can, and it’s not worth giving them up because you’re a pussy when it comes to feelings. Feelings suck sometimes. Get over it. Find someone who makes all the suckiness worth it and be happy. You deserve that much.”

Sera heaves a deep sigh, looking older than Ellana has ever seen her. “We’ll see, I guess.”

It takes less than a week before pictures of Sera and her new girlfriend get plastered all over social media. She calls Dagna her “widdle” and they make out in the Hanged Man all the time, but Ellana dares anyone to make fun of Sera for it, and no one wants to try her.

The first thing Josephine and Ellana had bought together for the apartment was a coffee machine. It’s a sleek, beautiful thing, covered with so many buttons and lights that Krem calls it the Enterprise, a joke about some nerdy TV show that only he watches. It can do pretty much everything except your laundry, with sections for steamed milk for lattes and cold brew and a hundred other things Ellana has never heard of.

Despite their harried and crowded schedules, hours holed away in their rooms studying or completing assignments and Josephine’s many dates with Krem, every Sunday morning the two girls carve out time for themselves, waking early and sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

Sometimes it’s quiet.

A lot of the times they bitch, and not just about classes or professors, but about their friends. Pet peeves, minor annoyances, things too petty to be worth a confrontation, but things that irritate them all the same.

It’s the kind of outlet that keeps Ellana from strangling Dorian when he obsessively guards the last cookie, or Sera when she gives Ellana derisive looks for not understanding some obscure joke from the internet, or Krem when he starts his conspiracy theory for how that stupid book series is going to end.
And sweet, diplomatic Josephine savagely catalogs everyone’s annoying quirks for them to review the following Sunday.

Ellana loves it.

A month into the spring semester, Josephine is already up and sipping her latte when Ellana wakes up, the table before her covered in papers. This immediately raises a red flag, as “Antivans never wake before the sun” according to Josephine.

“Whatcha doing?” she asks carefully, padding over to the coffee machine.

“Driving myself mad,” Josephine answers shortly. “There are so many forms to fill out for graduation. I’m starting to think it’s some kind of scam to prolong your stay here.”

Ellana jerks in surprise, hot coffee sloshing out and narrowly missing the hand she jerks back.

“Forms for what?”

She whirs around to find Josephine blinking owlishly up at her.

“For graduation,” she says slowly. “I’m a senior, Ellana. That’s what happens to seniors. They graduate.”

The icy beginnings of panic grip her heart. “You’re . . . leaving? You’re leaving Skyhold?”

Josephine shrugs. “I don’t know yet. There are multiple graduate programs I’m interested in, at a few different universities. I haven’t quite decided which one I’m going to settle for, though I suppose I need to make that decision soon as well. Ugh, this is such a headache.”

She grabs the form nearest to her and starts chewing on the tip of her pen. Ellana stands, frozen, coffee completely forgotten as a hundred things race through her mind.

She totally forgot that Josephine was one year ahead of her and now the thought of having senior year without her best friend is giving her heart palpitations. No more clothes sharing? No more Sunday Coffee Bitch Fest? No more – fucking Creators! – no more apartment.

“Josephine, what about the apartment?”

Josephine squints down at the paper in front of her and doesn’t answer at first. “Oh, don’t worry. The lease is month to month. You won’t have to pay for it.”

“Where am I going to live?”

Something in Ellana’s tone – the panic, the anger rising up to meet it – finally gets Josephine to raise her gaze up and pay attention.

“There’s plenty of student housing on campus. And seniors always get first choice of the single rooms, so you won’t have to get a new roommate.”

Ellana doesn’t know if she can stomach going back to the dorms after the life she has in the apartment. Not to mention how lonely it’s going to be.

“What about Krem?” she asks, reaching for something, anything, to get Josephine to stay. “What
about Cassandra? What about the rest of us?”

Josephine’s look softens, and she sets her pen down. “Ellana, I love all of you. And my friendship is never going away no matter where I go to school. But this is my future, and I can’t deny what I need to do because of other people. You should know that better than anyone.”

The realization hits her like one of Sera’s arrows to the face. This is what Dany felt like when Ellana announced her decision to move to Orlais. They even had a similar argument: Dany demanded to know who would help her with the Halla once Ellana left, and Ellana didn’t take the concern seriously.


This time Josephine gets up and wraps her arms around Ellana. “Oh, Ellana. I know you’re used to loss, but it doesn’t have to be that way every time. No amount of distance is going to keep me from you.”

Ellana just nods and grips her tighter.

Ellana 2:25 p.m.
so I might be homeless next semester

Solas 5:36 p.m.
What happened?

Ellana 5:37 p.m.

josephine is graduating this semester and I totally forgot
and she is the one who pays the apartment
and I don’t want to go back to the dorms
I hate the dorms

Solas 5:40 p.m.
Have you talked to your . . . benefactor?
He could get you an apartment

Ellana 5:41 p.m.
im not going to ask for that! Its too excessive
I’ll just pray that I get a single 
but damn I will miss that apartment

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyhold.edu
Subject: next semester

So I forgot that Josephine is a senior and she’s shopping around for graduate programs in just about every place but the Qun. If she doesn’t stay in Skyhold, the apartment is gone. So this is just to give you a heads up that you might have a room and board charge to take care of next semester. I think the single dorms are less expensive than the double, but I can have another roommate if it’s not.

Unrelated question: how severe are the laws against kidnapping and imprisonment?

Yours,
Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyhold.edu
From: fen_harel@mail.com
Re: Subject: next semester

Though the temptation is obvious, I must strongly advise against kidnapping. It’s difficult to do so on campus with so many witnesses and it will be difficult to continue your education with the limited prison library.

I have no problems leasing an apartment of your own on campus for your final year. You’ve worked so hard, you most certainly deserve to have your own bathroom.

Yours,
Fen’Harel

To: fen_harel@mail.com
From: e_lavellan@skyhold.edu
re:re:subject: next semester

I appreciate your efforts to keep me from prison. And the offer for living accomodations. Thank you, I might just be desperate enough to take you up on that. Hopefully it won’t come to that and Josephine will stay of her own volition and not because of the brainwashing techniques I’m currently researching.
Yours,

Ellana

A Sera in love is such a departure from her normal self that sometimes Ellana feels like she woke up in an alternate universe. Sera-in-love sneaks up behind her girlfriend and picks her up and spins her around, both squealing like children. Sera-in-love surprises Dagna with cookies she baked herself (with varying degrees of success). Sera-in-love has broken into the lab no more than five times to make out with Dagna, to the point where Dagna broke down and took Sera through a home-grown lab safety course so that she wouldn’t fuck up all of the experiments.

Sera-in-love hums.

Thank the Creators that Dagna is awesome because once the cat’s out of the bag, she’s everywhere. But nobody minds because it’s kind of hard not to love Dagna. No one knows what the hell she’s saying when she rambles about her experiments, but Sera nods and stares with rapt attention that not even her phone can take from her.

When they first meet Dagna, the differences between her and Sera seem stark. She’s calm, mature, sweet, and obvious about her love for science and learning where Sera is wild and unpredictable and still blows raspberries like a three-year-old. But there’s a crazy streak in Dagna a mile wide; it just shows itself in pieces.

Like the first time she shows up late at the Hanged Man. Sera drives herself mad trying to get a hold of her, even breaking down and physically calling Dagna when all her texts have gone unanswered.

“What if she blew herself up!!” Sera says, frantically scrolling through the local news feed for any signs of an explosion on Skyhold campus.

An hour later Dagna shows up, hair sticking out of her usually flawless braided bun, apologizing profusely.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you worry,” she says, pecking Sera on the cheek. “I accidentally sniffed the chloroform I was making and passed out for, like, three hours.”

“Why are you making chloroform?” Ellana’s gaze darts between the two of them. Sera’s insane schemes with the Red Jennies combined with Dagna’s chemical prowess . . . does not make for a good combination. “Where are you making chloroform?”

Is it possible she’s in the Carta? Dagna did come from Orzamarr.

Dagna laughs, as if she knows exactly what Ellana is thinking. “I made it just to see if I could. I’ve got a lab in my apartment I make all kinds of things in. I pour it out once I’m done. Hence the accidental sniffing.”

Dagna, as it turns out, does a lot of stuff “just to see if she could.”

Ellana finds out just how deep the rabbit hole goes when she hitches a ride with them to the lawn and hardware store in town. A tall plastic jug of bleach occupies her seat in the back.

“Can I move this to the trunk or something?” she asks, hefting it up.

“Oh shit!” Dagna rushes over to Ellana and takes the jug out of her hand, carefully testing the cap.
“I forgot I had that in there. Let me put it up in my apartment real quick.”

Ellana climbs into the back seat and notices a hole in the floorboard that goes straight down to the asphalt.

“What the hell was in that?” she asks when Dagna returns.

“Just some hydrochloric acid I made. But it turns out that the bleach jug has a faulty lid, hence the hole in the floor. I just forgot to take it out.”

“How do you forget something like that?”

Dagna laughs. “I’m kind of a ditz.”

They stop once on the way to the store so Dagna can buy a crumpled five dollar bill’s worth of gas – and add some kind of homebrew liquid from another, hopefully more secure bleach jug.

Ellana looks over at Sera. “And what the hell is that?”

Sera shrugs. “Some shite she made in her lab that makes the gas last longer. It probably won’t make the car explode.”

“Probably,” Ellana mutters, sitting back. “Great.”

They reach their destination without incidence, though Ellana clenched her fingers and prayed every time they hit a pothole.

Once in the store, they split off for a bit. Ellana searches out the kit she needs to fix the toilet running in their apartment, while Dagna wanders around, looking for . . . who the hell even knows. It’s easy to find the kit she needs . . . Dagna and Sera not so much.

What in this place would interest a (probably insane) chemist? She checks the two places Sera likes – the aisle with the light fixtures and the place with all the fancy rugs – without success.

Ellana 2:56 pm

where the hell r u?

Sera 2:57 pm

gardening

She finds Sera feeding an ant to a carnivorous plant while Dagna squeals over a bag of . . . stump remover?

“Oh, this is perfect,” she says, hefting it with surprising strength and hugging it. “I’ve been looking for this for ages.”

“What’s this one for?” Sera asks.
“All kinds of things. I just have to isolate some of the chemicals. Oh my Stones, I’m so excited!”

Ellana looks over at Sera. “Well, birthday and anniversary presents are going to be easy.”

She never finds out what the stump remover is used for, but the next time she sees Dagna, her hands are heavily bandaged from the “vapor” of whatever horrifying concoction she made.

Ellana does not take her up on a second ride again, visions of horrific explosions happening when they hit a pothole because the homebrew additive Dagna poured in the gas tank finally broke down and ignited something.

It’s too cold for archery, so Ellana starts back up the off-and-on boxing lessons that Iron Bull has been giving her. Krem is more than happy to have a partner that is not the hulking mass of his coach, though he says that Ellana terrifies him in a different way. But Krem is pretty damn scrappy and he doesn’t quit, even when there’s blood. Ellana thinks he’s trying to repay her for the Murder game.

They definitely feel the effects of the last sparring match the following morning, nursing equal black eyes over coffee.

“What in the Maker’s name happened to you two?”

Cassandra stands before their table in the campus coffee shop, her gaze darting between Krem and Ellana’s faces. Ellana catches Krem’s eye and they both grin – and then wince.

“Boxing,” Ellana says. “Krem and I had a sparring session last night.”

Cassandra’s eyebrows raise as she takes a seat. “Boxing? Since when?”

“Like a year?” Ellana thinks. “My freshman year I hit a guy that was being an asshole to Krem, and ever since Bull has been giving us street fighting pointers. And then gradually it just turned into straight up boxing. It’s not exactly a regular thing – just when we all have time.”

Cassandra goes quiet for a moment, and Ellana steels herself for some kind of subtle disapproval of violence.

“When is your next session?”

Ellana blinks. “What?”

“I want in.”

Despite the pain, Krem’s mouth stretches into a grin. “You serious? You want to hit someone?”

“Yes,” Cassandra replies immediately. “Especially since I can’t shoot anything until the weather warms up.”

He and Ellana exchange looks. Without saying a word they express both surprise at this turn of events and immediate acceptance.

“Okay,” Ellana says, turning back to Cassandra. “We’ll text you next time we have practice.”

Such an occasion comes a few days later. Cassandra meets with them in the small basement gym,
dressed in dark sweat pants and matching long sleeved tunic. Ellana has never seen Cassandra so informally dressed, it’s like seeing her in pajamas.

Iron Bull gives a whoop of delight at the sight of her.

“ I thought they were pulling my horns when they said you were coming,” he says, grinning.

The corner of Cassandra’s mouth twitches. “I had no idea I was giving off a reputation of feminine delicacy for you to be so surprised,” she says with heavy irony.

“ You ever been in a fight before?”

Cassandra shrugs one shoulder. “Scuffles with family and men with wandering hands. Nothing . . . official.”

“ Well, get in the ring and throw some punches. Let’s see what you got.”

Cassandra steps into the ring with Iron Bull. Even though she’s tall for a human, Iron Bull towers over her. He raises his hands, looking almost bored, while Cassandra raises her fists.

“ Ready?” she asks.

“ Always,” he says.

Cassandra delivers a lightning fast right hook to the palm of his hand. The smack practically reverberates against the walls, and his arm staggers back with the force of it.

“ Lucky shot,” he grumbles. “I wasn’t expecting you to be so fast.”

“ I took fencing as a child.”

“ Ah. Well, boxing’s a little more crude than that.” Iron Bull raises his hands. “Again.”

This time, even his expectation of her hit couldn’t prevent his flinch.

Iron Bull definitely does not look bored. In fact, he’s giving her the same laser-eyed stare he gives playback footage of old games.

“ Alright,” he says slowly. “Let’s see if I can block you.”

He raises his hands again and when Cassandra’s fists darts out, he knocks her hand down with his other forearm and then he throws his own punch. Before Ellana can shout a warning, Cassandra ducks and then her hand darts out and suddenly Iron Bull is choking and then suddenly he’s knocked flat on his ass. Ellana just stares, trying to comprehend just what exactly she witnessed, but Cassandra’s moves were too fast to track.


“ You okay, Coach?” Krem asks, taking a hesitant step forward.

Iron Bull waves him off and sits up.

“ I knew it!” he says, coughing. “I knew you were fucking with me, you hustler!”

“ I did no such thing,” says Cassandra indignantly, crossing her arms. “I learned martial arts privately from tutors. I have never been associated with an organization, or competed in any way. I did not lie.
You simply did not ask the right questions.”

“ So why are you down here?” Iron Bull gets to his feet.

“ I want to hit something that can take it,” Cassandra says.

A crooked grin crosses his face. “Oh, don’t worry. I can take it.”

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To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: New Crush

So no one could possibly doubt how much Iron Bull adores Dorian, but I think he’s getting a new crush. On Cassandra of all people.

It all started when she found out about the boxing lessons Krem and I get from Iron Bull (did I ever tell you about those? They started after I decked that one asshole in the cafeteria freshman year). She showed up at our next lesson and you could tell Iron Bull felt kind of cocky, thinking that he was dealing with a newbie.

I don’t know how the hell she did it, but she had him on the floor gagging in about two seconds. Apparently she took years of mixed martial arts from private tutors in her teenage rebellious princess years and she missed the sparring, especially with the stress of midterms coming up.

We’ve had three more lessons since then, and at the end Iron Bull and Cassandra always step into the ring and see how long they can duke it out. The morning after their first spar they both looked like domestic violence victims, so they had to tone it down after that. But I swear, Iron Bull is probably feasting on those memories of fighting with her later that night, from the gleam in his eye every time she gets one over one him.

I’m due to spar with her next lesson and I have to admit, I’m scared shitless.

Wish me luck,

Ellana.

“ You look frightened.”

Cassandra stares at her from across the ring, a smug glint in her eyes.

“ I am frightened,” Ellana admits shamelessly. “You’re going to kick my ass.”

The corner of Cassandra’s mouth lifts. “I promise to use only the skills of boxing, with which you have had much more practice.”

“ That does not comfort me in the slightest.”

“ Are you two going to snipe at each other all damn night or are we going to see some action?” Iron
Bull calls from beside the ring.

“Keep your shirt on,” Ellana yells back. “Oh, wait . . .”

“You better hope I don’t get in that ring,” he warns, but it’s all bluff. Ellana gives him the middle finger anyway and returns her attention to Cassandra.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Ellana doesn’t last long. Even only using boxing moves, Cassandra hits too fast and too hard. It’s all Ellana can do to block the shots and resist the urge to run around the ring to get away.

“Okay, okay. Uncle! Uncle!” she shouts, holding her hands in front of her face to block Cassandra’s raining blows.

“You lasted longer than last time,” Cassandra says, pride leaking through her smug tone. “You’re improving.”

“Then why do I still feel pathetic?” Ellana asks, holding the stitch in her side.

“Iron Bull has gone too easy on you. You’re not used a real challenge.”

Cassandra tosses a side-eyed glance at Iron Bull, knowing exactly the effect of that comment and planning for it.

“I’m almost three feet taller than all of you,” he says, raising up. “If I don’t hold back, I’d probably kill you. But if you want a real challenge, I’ll give you a real challenge.”

“Are you sure you can bring yourself to hurt a delicate woman such as myself?”

“Oh, I think I can find it in me. Ellana, get out of the ring.”

Ellana does so gladly, going over to stand with Krem. They exchange looks as Iron Bull straps on his boxing gloves. Neither one of them has ever seen Cassandra this sassy or this savage. Maybe they shouldn’t be surprised, though. Cassandra always seemed to have a warrior’s undercurrent in her intensity, her inability to keep her opinions to herself, her tendency to take charge. It’s easy to imagine, in another life, Cassandra as some kind of badass general.

After a few rounds, she generously allows Iron Bull a reprieve, citing a test the next day. Ellana heads to pack up her stuff and finds a text from Merrill.

Merrill 8:25 p.m.

Happy Banal’var

attached: image

Though Ellana has a hard time imagining Merrill drinking anything, the drink she holds up in her selfie is very clearly wine.

A strange feeling swoops in her gut. She’d forgotten all about Banal’var. Not that there would be a real way to celebrate on her own, since Banal’var is just a giant, multi-clan party to celebrate the
Dalish’s continued existence despite the Chantry’s best efforts.

Would it even count if she participated? She’s not doing much to be Dalish in the face of attempted extermination. Hell, if it weren’t for the vallaslin, no one would even know she was Dalish.

It’s getting old, the not knowing what exactly she is, the constant gauging of how much of herself to be in any one place or time. It’s tempting to talk to Merrill about it, being literally the only other Dalish person she knows outside her clan, but getting excommunicated from her own clan makes the whole subject touchy, and Ellana doesn’t want to reopen old wounds. And who’s to say Merrill is any more at peace with herself than Ellana?

But she has no one else who could possibly understand.

“Did you see how she blocked,” Iron Bull is saying to Krem. “You should copy that. You leave yourself wide open all the time.”

And it occurs to her, that Ellana isn’t the only non-human far from home here. She bids Cassandra goodnight and tells Krem to head off without her before approaching Iron Bull.

He gives her a side-eyed glance as he unwraps his hands.

“Everything alright, Ellana?”

“Yeah,” she says, feeling oddly fidgety. “I just . . . I have a question, and I think you’re the only other person I know who would understand.”

Iron Bull waves a hand over to the far wall. “Fair enough. Go grab that broom first.”

Ellana pauses for a moment before walking over and grabbing the broom leaning near the punching bag.

“What’s this for?”

The Iron Bull grins at her. “My advice doesn’t come for free. Talk and sweep, Ellana. Talk and sweep.”

The corner of her mouth quirks up and she starts. “Everything about this place, about Orlais, is completely different from the way that I grew up. I had to change or forget a lot of my habits, ideas, practices just to fit in. At first I didn’t care because I was pissed off, but now . . . I miss it. And I feel like I’ve given up so much of it that I don’t . . . feel Dalish anymore.”

“And you came to me because I’m Qunari.”

Ellana looks up, worried she may have offended him, but if she did, no trace of it shows on his face. His gaze is steady and patient.

“You’re the only person I know that had to assimilate into a different race’s culture, one that’s completely different from your own. How do you live here and stay Qunari?”

Iron Bull doesn’t answer right away. He walks over to the edge of the ring and sits down.

“Back when I was still in the Qun, I traveled all over the world. I’ve been to every country in this hemisphere, so even when I was in the Qun, I wasn’t home much. And then I left home permanently. Through it all, I’ve been Qunari. I’m Qunari in the Qun and out of the Qun. I’m Qunari in Seheron and Qunari in Tevinter. I was Qunari when I spied for them, and I’m Qunari now
coaching the team of a sport no one gives a shit about. Hey, I didn’t say you could stop.”

Ellana looks down at the broom that’s been still in her hands for the last few minutes and starts sweeping again.

“Qunari isn’t what I do or where I live. It’s who I am, and no one can take that away from me, not even the Qun. And the same goes for you. You’re Dalish here just as much as you are Dalish back home. You’d be Dalish even if you took off your vallaslin. How much of your culture you partake in is your decision, but nothing can cancel out your identity. Any other questions?”

Ellana shakes her head. They finish straightening up the gym in silence, Iron Bull giving her the space to be lost in thought. The way he described being Dalish goes against everything she grew up thinking. After so many centuries of persecution, being Dalish is something you do. It has to be, in order for them to exist. Without their holidays, their practices, their stories, they would be no different than city elves. Being Dalish has always meant practicing their culture out of spite and preservation and pride, in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful organization that wanted all traces of that culture exterminated.

The thought that she could still be Dalish without the Dales, without her Clan, without even her vallaslin – it doesn’t sound right.

But it doesn’t sound wrong either.

The more she thinks about it, the more hope she has that maybe she didn’t give up anything after all.

After the equipment has been put away, the floor swept, the lockers shut, she and Iron Bull shut off the lights and head home.

“Thanks,” she says before they part ways. “For, you know . . .”

Iron Bull squeezes her shoulder. “It’s not easy leaving everything behind. If you have any more questions, don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“So long as I sweep.”

He nods with a crooked smile. “So long as you sweep.”

Spring Break approaches and with it the long hours spent in the library studying for midterms. Even after three years, Ellana is not immune to the stress of projects and papers. It’s gotten worse as the classes get harder, actually. One particularly late night on her way back to the apartment, Dagna and Sera creep up behind her on either side and lace their arms between hers.

“What is this, a hit from the Carta?” Ellana asks, looking down at both of them.

“You seem stressed,” Dagna says, smiling winningly. “I have something that can help you with that.”

“. . . are you making drugs, Dagna?”

“Yes!” Sera says immediately.

Dagna laughs. “Of course not!” She sobers quickly. “Though I could, if I wanted, in all seriousness.”

“You like hitting shit and breaking it, right?” says Sera. “Well this is going to be almost as fun as
getting your ass kicked by Cassandra.”

She’s too curious not to find out. “I do like hitting things, you got me there.”

“Yay!” Dagna squeals. “This way, please.”

They cart her oﬀ the science building, both of them giggling like maniacs the entire way. There they squirrel Ellana down the darkened hallways into one of the labs in the back. A random assortment of fruits is lined up on the counter next to a steel jug-looking thing with a heavy locked lid.

“We’re freezing things with liquid nitrogen!” Dagna says, clapping her hands. “But ﬁrst – safety!”

She hands Ellana a set of rubber gloves, plastic goggles, and a stiff rubber apron and forces them onto Sera, who dons it all with nary a protest.

“What is liquid nitrogen?” Ellana asks.

Dagna grins. “Oh, a science virgin! This is so exciting. Liquid nitrogen is a cryogenic fluid that --”

“Freezes shit solid,” Sera ﬁnishes. “Any shit. Totally solid. So you can bash it with a hammer.”

“That sounds awesome, actually.”

Dagna demonstrates with a banana, lowering it into the canister with a pair of tongs. Seconds later she pulls it out, smoke billowing like an evil spell, and smashes it against the counter.

It shatters like glass, pieces of it ﬂying everywhere. Ellana picks one up to inspect it. It’s hard as stone.

“Holy shit,” she says. “I want the next one.”

Ellana 10:30 pm

attachment: video

Solas 10:35 pm

a valuable use for donor-funded resources

Ellana 10:36

very valuable for midterm stress

My favorite was smashing the watermelon!

Solas 10:37

A strange study tactic to be sure
But I will not judge what works.

Good luck on your midterms

Ellana 10:39

thanks!

The hotel Sten reserved their rooms at sits on the waterfront, flowering vines climbing up the walls and wrapping themselves around the balcony. There’s enough funding to secure the small group of five students their own room. Ellana sets her suitcase on the bed, kicks off her shoes, and investigates the room, happy to stretch her legs after a 12-hour train ride.

It’s easily the most luxurious room she has ever set foot in. The walls are covered in thick, faintly glossy cream wallpaper. The carpet feels decadently plush under her bare feet, a deep blue that goes well with the gold accents of the crown molding and the sun-shaped ceiling fan. The decadence continues in the bathroom, with blue tile backsplash, gold fixtures on the sink, and a tub that more closely resembles a hot tub than anything else.

Ellana snaps pictures of it and sends it to Krem.

Ellana 7:21 pm

ill give you one guess on how im spending the evening

Krem 7:22 pm

Maker’s balls, you could kill someone in that tub

easily.

Ellana 7:22 pm

there are two kinds of people in the world. . .

Krem 7:23pm

if you say you didn’t have the same thought

youre a gd liar

Ellana 7:23pm
She ends her investigation on the balcony, toying with the leaves of a potted bush and gazing out onto the river below. The sun is starting to set, turning the river gold and glinting off the gondolas. The view is beautiful and not one that she ever thought she would get to experience for herself. She snaps a picture and considers putting it on her oft-neglected social media profile, but it reminds her too much of something an entitled trust fund baby would post.

Instead she has another idea.

_Ellana 7:35pm_

you will never guess where I am

_attachment: 1 image_

_attachment: 1 image_

_attachment 1 image_

_Solas 7:37 pm_

I would judge, based entirely on the depth of the bathtub

_and the jets I spy embedded within

_that you are not in your college apartment_

_Ellana 7:38 pm_

you would be correct, sir

_Solas 7:38 pm_

Is that gold filigree I spy on the handles?

_Ellana 7:38_

_hell yes it is._

_Solas 7:39pm_

I take it you went with Josephine to Antiva for spring break?
Ellana 7:39 pm

actually im in Val Royeaux

1. sten took some of us students on an art trip to the royal museum

Solas 7:42 pm

Are you indeed?

When do you plan on visiting the museum?

How long are you staying?

Ellana 7:42 pm

tomorrow morning and about two days

nosy

Solas 7:44 pm

Apologies, but it sounds like an interesting trip.

Ellana 7:45 pm

Im excited about it

Solas 7:46 pm

It’s a very well curated museum.

I think you will have a good time

Sten expects their group to be ready and dressed by eight a.m. so they can breakfast at some fancy bakery across the street from the museum. Ellana flops on the bed, intending to watch some TV on the ridiculous big screen that hides in the armoire, but the soft down of the mattress cover lulls her to sleep almost against her will.

She has to admit that Sten’s breakfast trip was worth the early wake up call. Tucked away like a
secret in an alley across the street from the museum, the interior is painted a creamy yellow with dark wood beams. The flaky pastries practically dissolve in her mouth, the sweetness of the strawberry filling never overpowering, and the coffee is straight up divine. Also, the closer they get to nine a.m. the more the tiny place starts rapidly filling up.

Just ten minutes after opening, already a line starts snaking towards the museum doors. Ellana doesn’t mind the wait though; her eyes are too preoccupied with taking in the splendor of the architecture. The main entrance is cavernous, the ceiling standing at least four stories high and dotted with gold sunbursts. A huge marble staircase dominates the space beyond the ticket booths, flanked on either side by stone columns. In the upper floors, the edges of elaborate frames wink in the dim lighting.

Dr. Sten generously pays for everyone’s admission, and their small group scatters to hit up their favorite sections first. Ellana looks down at the map she’s been given, a little paralyzed with indecision. The museum is sectioned off by both artistic styles and medium, so Ellana starts with the first uncrowded room she can find – Early Chantry Portraiture – and starts working her way through the rooms.

One time when Josephine dragged her and Krem pants shopping so they wouldn’t keep stealing each other’s jeans, they ran into Sera at the mall, who then insisted on stopping at the candy store. This store did not sell bags or bars – it was a candy dispenser buffet that charged you by the pound and Sera zipped all over that store, sneaking in malt balls and gummies into her mouth when the clerk wasn’t looking. She bought no less than eight pounds of candy, and it was the happiest Ellana had ever seen her before Dagna came along.

Ellana knows what Sera felt in that moment. She wants to split herself into pieces like an amoeba and experience the museum all at once, just to feel relief from the agonizing clash of her desire to savor each piece and the anticipation of seeing the next one.

She spends almost an hour just in sculpture, vibrating with the urge to duck into Blessed Age oil paintings next door. But she forces herself to take her time, and when she does finally walk through to the next gallery, she finds Dr. Sten occupying one of the benches. The painting before him makes Ellana do a double take.

_The Banks of the Seheron_ is one of the most famous paintings to come out of the Blessed Age, a copy of which hangs in his office. Ellana feels a strange jitter in her stomach at seeing it in person. It’s almost like meeting a celebrity on the street after seeing only copied images of their likeness. The actual painting itself is huge, at least ten feet in length and three feet tall. Her feet carry her step by step until she stands next to Dr. Sten.

"Wow," she says.

"Magnificent, isn’t it?" Dr. Sten asks. He slides down the bench to leave room for her.

Ellana sits down slowly, not taking her eyes off the painting. "Yeah. I know – all those classes I’ve taken with you and the best thing I can say is wow. But . . . words can’t really do it justice, can they?"

"No. They cannot."

She leans forward to study it. There are tiny seashells and crabs in the sand.

"It’s so detailed. I never noticed that before."

"The smaller reproductions cannot do justice to a painting of this size. Thus, many of the important
details are lost. Every blade of grass, every shadow in the rocks, every grain of the wood, has been
detailed with care by this artist."

“ You have a copy this painting in your office, right?”

“ That is correct.”

“ Is there a reason why you love it so much? I mean, besides the fact that it’s an incredible painting?”

“ I restored this painting.”

He says it so matter-of-factly, as if stating the time of day or the weather, that it almost doesn’t sink
in. Ellana jerks her gaze from the painting to stare at him. “You what?”

He bows his head. “ Many years ago I used to work for this museum. I’ve restored many of the
pieces here, including multiple quality landscapes. But none have moved me the same as this one.”

“ Why?”

He is quiet for a moment.

“ There is a popular misconception that the Qun does not value art. This is false. There is much the
Qun admires about the dedication and control needed to become a skilled artist. But in the Qun,
everything must have a purpose, including art. We use art for visual documentation, for historical
preservation, for function, among other things.”

Dr. Sten gestures at the painting with a heavy hand.

“ But this painting has no purpose. There is nothing in this piece worth documenting – no important
figures, no architecture, no tasks. It is simply a reflection of the beauty of nature in my country. The
skill involved took decades to hone. The size and level of detail, not to mention the rare pigments of
the sunset, took months to complete, if not years. So much effort just to show the beauty of one
sunset out of thousands on a deserted beach. Any other artist, I could understand. But a Qunari
painted this and it made me realize something that changed me.”

He turns to look at her, his usually impenetrable gaze softened into something almost unrecognizable
for him.

“ Sometimes the purpose of something can be just that it exists. One does not have to continually
justify one’s own existence in order to have value. It is a message that I sorely needed in that period
of my life, and I have never forgotten it.”

To have Dr. Sten of all people share with her something so personal and vulnerable feels more
precious than the gift of this trip. Ellana has no idea how to respond, though she suspects calling any
attention to it would be the wrong choice.

“ Is that the reason why you started teaching?” she asks instead.

He shrugs his shoulders. “I suppose in part, yes. I started teaching because I was disturbed during my
visits to the museum. As you can tell, early admission is often crowded. Yet if you take a look
around, you will see very few people your age and younger. So much skill and dedication and care
has been put into these pieces, but in thirty years, who will be there to witness it? I thought if I could
teach art, then I could cultivate an admiration for the craft in future generations, and the young people
will return to the museum.”
“Do you think you’ve been successful so far?”

“Only time will tell. But I remain hopeful.”

She smiles at him, and the corners of his mouth soften in return.

“Thank you for inviting me out on this trip,” she says. “I haven’t got to say it yet, but I appreciate that you thought of me.”

“I know what it’s like to leave everything you’ve known behind for the opportunity to increase your knowledge. It is not an easy task, and many people give up. I admire your dedication, and I am happy to provide you another such opportunity.”

Solas had tried to express the same kind of sentiment last summer, but there is none of his offensive arrogance in Dr. Sten’s words, just a simple statement of fact. And yet, coming from so reserved a person with such terrifyingly high standards, his simple praise hits her harder than any compliment she has received.

It stuns her into speechlessness. But Dr. Sten does not seem to expect a response. Instead he nods in the direction down the hallway. “The Impressionists lie that way. You hold the Impressionists in very high esteem, if I recall correctly.”

Ellana swallows hard and nods, trying to feign nonchalance.

“You do,” she says. “I will definitely check them out. See you later, Dr. Sten.”

He nods. “Enjoy the museum.”

Ellana wanders with a deeper sense of wonder and gratitude after that. A part of her admires the beauty of the pieces, but she makes the effort to see art the way that Dr. Sten has taught her, the way that he sees it himself. His words buzz in her mind with almost the same effect as Varric’s First Day champagne.

Her phone buzzes with a text.

Josie 11:35 am

Don’t forget to check out the miniatures!

Ellana 11:35am

the what

Josie 11:36 am

There’s a whole exhibit on these miniature dollhouse rooms

All the rooms are from different countries and time periods
and it is all historically accurate

Ellana 11:37 am
only you would make me look at dollhouses
in one of the most prestigious art museums in the world

Josie 11:38 am
You can make fun of me AFTER you’ve seen them

Ellana 11:39 am
ill hold you to that

“I didn’t know they let the masterpieces wander around free of their frames.”

Ellana jerks her head up at the sound of that voice – immediately familiar but not possible – to see Solas walking towards her.

Dressed in a crisp cream button down and dark brown slacks, his eyes framed by black, square glasses, he looks so different from the grubby, dirt smeared Solas she saw every day last summer that she almost thinks she’s hallucinating.

In fact, if he hadn’t been striding purposefully straight towards her, she would have dismissed him as some kind of Solas doppelganger and moved on.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, and winces a little at her own bluntness.

He stops a couple feet before her, hands resting in his pockets, and offers her a smile.

“The lab I work at is actually just a few blocks over. I had the day off and thought I would surprise you.”

The smile fades and he looks suddenly discomfited. His eyes, that weird greyish, purpleish blue, widen behind the rims of his glasses. “Though now I realize how rather stalkerish this could seem. I had planned on accompanying you, but if you wish to see the museum alone, I am more than happy to leave you in peace.”

“No,” she says quickly. “I’m not angry at all, I’m just – surprised. I never expected to see you here.”

Solas ducks his head down. “It was a spontaneous decision, actually. I originally planned on texting you for lunch, but I had the time off and . . .”

He trails off, looking more awkward by the second, and Ellana is tempted to let him flounder, but the secondhand embarrassment is starting to get to her.
She grins at him. “It’s good to see you, Solas. I’m glad you came. Actually, the only person I know on this trip is Dr. Sten, so I would love the company.”

The relief on his face is palpable “Yes, I am quite the admirer of Dr. Sten’s work here, but touring the museum with him would be too intimidating even for me.”

“I just sat with him in front of The Banks of the Seheron, having no idea that he restored it himself.”

Something lights up in Solas’s eyes. “Isn’t it beautiful? No photo can truly capture it.”

“It was like meeting a celebrity.”

He chuckles. “Yes, I understand. Nothing can compare to the experience of seeing art in person.”

“I take it you’ve been to this museum before?”

“Many, many times. But the sense of wonder never dies. As such, I will happily follow you wherever you may wish to lead me.”

He holds his arm out like a gallant gentleman, and Ellana takes it.

“I like the sound of that,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

Banal'var -- exile/banishment. This is a Dalish holiday that celebrates the persistence of the Dalish culture despite efforts made to the contrary. AKA a giant Fuck the Chantry party where everyone gets really really drunk.

Also, everything Dagna does or says -- save for the liquid nitrogen -- has been my very real experience with one of my high school boyfriends, who was a chem major in university when we dated (don't worry, we were both 17, he just skipped a grade). I could not make this up.
School is out baby and I'm a free woman! No grading, no lessons, no crazy children. Expect slightly? faster updates? *Keeps fingers crossed*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Solas consults Ellana’s map to check off the sections she has already visited.

“Josephine keeps nagging at me to check out the miniatures?” Ellana says as he looks over her shoulder. “But those are all the way in the basement. Is it worth the trip?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “I think they may surprise you. But we can save that for last. What do you most want to see?”

“All of it,” Ellana says. “Even the weird abstract stuff. I’ve never been in a museum like this before; I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Well, we best get moving. We have a lot of ground to cover.”

They finish off the Impressionists first.

“I’ve always enjoyed this style of art,” Solas says. “It reminds me of the fuzzy quality of dreams. It’s something I could never quite capture in my own drawings.”

“It’s probably my favorite,” Ellana admits. “Though sometimes I wonder if Gounelle was just painting what he saw with his glasses off.”

“Hmm.” Solas takes several steps away from her and pulls his glasses down, studying her a moment. “Your theory may hold some merit. If only we could travel in time to prove it.”

Ellana laughs and shakes her head.

“You’re a dork.”

“I’ve been called worse things. By you, as a matter of fact.” A smile cracks on his face as he pushes his glasses back up. “Come, Antivan oil paintings are next.”

“So what do people do in museums?” Ellana asks.

“Admire the artwork? What is else is a museum for?”

“I always thought people were expected to look at a piece and then spout off a bunch of pretentious bullshit about the symbolism or something.”

Solas chuckles, somewhat nervously. “Yes, I suppose some people use it to show off. Dorian always used to play this ridiculously crass game called Wed, Bed, and Behead.”
Ellana raises her eyebrows. “You and Dorian went to art museums?”

“We were roommates, remember? And there were times when I could tolerate his company without wanting to kill him.”

“So how does Wed, Bed, and Behead go?”

“You pick three artworks in a room and declare which one you would marry, which one you would have sex with, and which one you would execute.”

“That does sound like a very Dorian game. Let’s do it.”

“Of course you would say that,” says Solas. “Very well. We’ll start here and meet up in the middle.”

They head in opposite directions, lingering over the various frames. It’s difficult to choose among the many ridiculous-looking people here, but after some mental debate, Ellana finally decides and stands with Solas in the middle of the room.

“Ladies first,” he says.

“Alright.”

Ellana leads him over to her side of the room. “First I would wed this guy.”

She points to a profile of a young man, dark skinned with bright golden eyes that give the viewer a side-eyed smirk.

“Oh? He seems an outrageous flirt,” Solas says. “Do you like that type?”

Ellana shrugs. “Not really, though he reminds me a lot of my friend Zevran, and I can hang with that. But he looks rich as hell which means he’ll have a killer library.”

“You’ll marry a man solely based on how many books he has in his possession?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

The corner of his mouth curls up. “I have too many books in my own possession to worry about someone else’s.”

“Well, aren’t we lucky?” She sticks her tongue out at him. “Anyway, moving on. Definitely bed this one.”

She points to a portrait of a woman leaning against a balcony, the brightly colored sails of boats in the background harbor. The wind teases her hair and tugs at the dark purple silks of her dress.

“Interesting, as you cannot see her face. Does it have anything to do with the book lying beside her?”

Ellana peers closer at the painting to spy a small blue book sitting on the rim of the balcony. “Oh huh. I didn’t see that, actually. She just has a quiet grace that I like. Dignity. And yeah, the book helps now that I noticed it.”

“And which would you behead?”

“This bastard right here.” Ellana leads him a little ways down the wall to a tall man leaning against a stocky black stallion, his hand resting possessively on the horse’s bridle.
“And what crimes do you think this man has done to warrant such punishment?”

“The way he’s looking at his horse. There’s no way they have a normal bond. He’s practically caressing it.”

Solas snorts. “Yes, I can see it.”

“Yeah. Fuck this guy.” Ellana turns to face him. “Alright, what did you find?”

She has to admit she’s a little excited at this shallow, base look into his psyche. Despite interacting with each other every day for an entire summer, and texting nearly every week since then, she knows very little about him besides the basics.

Solas leads her across the room to a painting of woman with eyes that pierce like a bird of prey and a haughty, arrogant tilt of her head, as if she only looked at the painter as a professional courtesy.

“Behead,” he says.

“You said that with quite some conviction,” Ellana remarks.

“She reminds me of an old classmate of mine. Her mother, Dr. Flemeth Wilds, is very well respected in her field and the chair of my thesis committee. Her daughter, on the other hand, is an arrogant fool with infuriating entitlement to elvish culture.”

“Entitlement?”

“Yes. She enjoys explaining my own history to me, as if I had no idea what Arlathan culture was like.”

Ellana just stares at him for a moment, waiting to see if he catches on. But judging from the way he stares blankly back, he doesn’t.

“Wow. I can’t imagine what that feels like,” she says dryly.

It’s beautiful, watching the realization unfold across his face and the resulting flush that spreads across his cheeks. He clears his throat and takes a few steps forward to the next portrait.

“This is whom I would wed.”

In the middle of a field of flowers, the young woman looks like something out of a fairy tale with a thin, delicate face, her lips a dark red stain, her hair flowing like ink around her.

For some reason Ellana feels immediately disgusted.

“Are you serious? She looks like a plague victim who’s gonna keel over with one hardy cough.”

“That’s hardly fair, I should think,” says Solas.

“So what’s the draw, then?”

He studies the painting again, head tilted slightly. “She looks . . . lost. Adrift. In need of stability. I would enjoy providing something like that to a person I knew that needed it.”

“It wouldn’t ever get on your nerves that someone is dependent on you all the time?”

“I like to think of it more that I have made a difference for someone,” he says.
“Oh.” Ellana is taken aback for a moment. “I guess I can understand that.”

He gives her a look, brief but weighted with a significance she doesn’t understand, before smoothing out his features and gesturing grandly.

“And last, but certainly not least, whom I would bed.”

The painting is easily one of the biggest in the room. A woman sits astride a galloping horse, her dark hair flying behind her, a bow in her hand and an arrow in her teeth. After a moment, Ellana gasps because she’s studied this painting before.

“Well, shit, Solas. *Queen Madrigal?* You really pulled out all the stops for this one.”

Solas stands with his hands behind his back. “Wouldn’t you? Look at her. Intelligence. Grace. Ferocity. She has it all.”

“How the hell do you play *Wed, Bed, and Behead* with *this*?”

“Creatively,” he says, hints of a smirk playing around his mouth. “Are you up to the challenge?”

They split off to their separate walls, and Ellana mulls over the strange assortment before her. It takes longer than she expected to make her choices, trying to take this as seriously as possible, weighing each painting for some kind of emotional resonance.

She ends up marrying the painting of the boxes – “for stability” – beheading a piece that just looks like garish finger painting from a pre-schooler with no knowledge of color theory, and bedding the one of dreamy, swirly clouds that remind her of Cassandra’s steamy romances.

Solas weds a painting that sort of looks like flowers if you tilt your head at the right angle, beheads a creepy black void, and then stops before a piece that looks like white paint splatters.

“But this one I bed.”

He side-eyes her, his mouth twitching, and it takes her a second to get the joke: the splatters of white paint closely resemble something else.
Her jaw falls open. Solas, of all people, cracking a dirty joke.

He chuckles at her reaction.

“You know, Dorian had the same scandalized expression the first time we played this game.”

“Well, it’s kind of like hearing your grandmother make a saucy joke.”

“You know, I don’t think I’m as old as you make me out to be.”

“I don’t have much to go on. You never give me anything.”

He smiles. “Well, I’m hardly going to own up to it now.”

They don’t only play crass games in the museum. Sometimes she stumbles into a room and all she can do is stare, hands clenched behind her back so she doesn’t give into the urge to touch. Sometimes Solas will point out an old favorite and discuss in loving terms why it has captivated him. Sometimes Ellana will share tidbits of history she’s learned in her classes.

At the end of their tour, they head downstairs to the lower floor.

There is almost no crowd in the miniatures exhibit. The wall is lined with little glass windows that frame each miniature room. Ellana has to reevaluate her earlier opinion because nothing is childish about the first box she sees: a bedroom from the Halamshiral Palace.

The bed frame is deep cherry wood, covered in carved vines. The lush, red silk of the bedclothes are hand-painted with tiny gold fleur-de-lis; the tapestries that cover the back wall hand-stitched with scenes of a ball. An equally delicate Tevinter rug covers the stone floor. The (real) marble fireplace contains an electric fire, the warm glow reflecting off the gold crown molding on the ceiling. An elegantly carved armoire dominates one corner, and beside it a dresser and mirror, complete with tiny bottles of perfume and gold chains.

The amount of craftsmanship to create such tiny things blows her mind. Not to mention the attention to detail in other rooms. Though the Halamshiral room is pristine, as if a maid has just left after tidying up, the Ferelden bakery contains half eaten pastries left behind on small wooden tables, complete with a mouse half the size of her pinky nail chewing on fallen crumbs. The satin sheets from a Tevinter magister’s room half hung off the bed, the self portrait that hangs up over the door hand-painted with infinitesimal brush strokes on real canvas.

Each room contains a window with hand painted scenery outside and appropriate lighting for different times of day.

They even have a room that contains an old Dalish aravel. Ellana gasps at the sight of it. The aravel has everything – tiny bows and arrows propped up against the wall, a shrine to Sylaise glowing in the corner, herbs and strips of jerky hanging from the ceiling, carpets woven from reeds on the floor.

Ellana 5:43

I concede

the miniatures are awesome
On their way towards the exit, they run into Dr. Sten.

“Dr. Felassan.” Dr. Sten bows his head. “An unexpected pleasure.”

Of course they know each other.

Solas extends his hand and Sten shakes it solemnly. “How is your trip faring, Dr. Sten?”

“Well, thank you. I think the students are enjoying themselves.” He nods at Ellana and she smiles in return. “I must admit, I did not know you two were already acquainted with one another.”

“Ellana interned with my crew in the Emerald Graves National Park,” Solas says and despite the drama of that summer, Ellana straightens up a little at the pride in his voice.

Sten’s eyebrows raise a little. “How fascinating. Given your love of history, Serah Lavellan, I’m sure your time was quite satisfying.”

“I mean, I was pretty much just manual labor,” she says, feeling oddly shy. “I didn’t do anything fancy.”

“She’s lying,” Solas says. “She discovered two primitive paintings on the walls and a potential statue of Fen’Harel that I had overlooked.”

Dr. Sten’s gaze could burn holes through her. “She failed to mention such successes.”

Ellana blushes. “Sorry, Dr. Sten. I still have the photos on my phone if you’re interested.”

“I am,” he says gravely, and yeah, she is definitely in trouble. “I am indeed. I bid you good evening.”

“Bye, Dr. Sten,” Ellana says, somewhat sheepishly.

Dr. Sten bows his head and heads out the exit.

Solas turns to her."Would you permit me to take you to dinner?"

"I don't care where I go or what I do as long as it involves sitting down," she replies. "But nowhere fancy -- I blew too much money at that stupid gift shop."

"Yes, the gift shop is a vile temptress. But dinner tonight is on me, if you would like."

Ellana cracks her neck a little. "You know, I'm too exhausted to argue. But, seriously, I don't do fancy."

"I would never torture you with satin tablecloths and juggling more than one fork at a time," Solas says and she side eyes him for a moment, looking for sarcasm and finding none. "I know of a bistro around the corner that has always served excellent sandwiches."

She gestures towards the door. "Lead the way, then, good Ser."
They step outside into the evening air. Spring has only just started, the air turning crisp with the darkening sky. Solas leads her down the street, gallantly taking on a couple of the gift bags from her arms. She might have bought too many souvenirs for people.

The restaurant does only lie a few blocks away. Even though Ellana's feet still protest the short journey, the beauty of the scenery drowns it out. The street lights in this part of town curl around in elaborate ironwork vines, the light blooming from glass flowers. The glow lights up the underside of blooming trees that line the streets. This is the breathtaking Val Royeaux that has enraptured tourists from all over Thedas, the Val Royeaux that eluded and excluded Ellana the entire time she lived here.

She's not quite sure how she feels about finally experiencing it. It's hard not to drink in the sounds of the waterfront lapping on the other side of the street, the smell of the flowering trees, the sight of immaculately constructed storefronts. It's also hard to swallow her resentment of a place crawling with people who hate people like her, who have so much while those living five minutes away in the same city have so little.

The bistro itself is tucked away around the corner from an elaborate wedding boutique and a lawyer's office. The inside is lit dimly by strings of lights that criss-cross over the ceiling. Despite dinner hour, the place is not very crowded, and they are seated almost immediately in one of the middle booths and handed thick, leather-bound menus. Ellana tries to school the alarm from her expression when she catches sight of the prices.

"Twenty-five sovs for a sandwich and a cup of soup?" she hisses when the waitress takes off for their drink order. "This is casual?!"

His eyebrows raise a little. "Well... yes. Granted, it's not a back alley burger joint, but it also doesn't serve twelve courses on gold plated china."

"So this is what you consider middle ground?"

He gives her a rather piercing gaze. "Are you uncomfortable here? We don’t have to stay. I do know some genuine back alley burger joints, if you would prefer one of those."

Once again she strains to hear any hints of sarcasm or judgment in his tone. She’s rapidly starting to realize that not only are they separate by a gulf of culture, but also one of class. And if it’s one thing she got really fucking sick of in Val Royeaux, it was people snubbing their nose at her.

But once again she only hears sincerity in his voice.

"No, it’s fine. I’m just... I just grew up different, I guess, with different expectations. Sorry."

"Don’t apologize. I must admit that your perspective contrasts greatly from mine, but I enjoy it nonetheless. I have always been improved by the company of people different from me."

She thinks back to all the times she screamed at him and threatened violence last summer, and the corner of her mouth quirks up.

The rest of dinner goes smoothly. Ellana has to admit that the sandwiches might be delicious enough to deserve a twenty-five sovereign price tag, but she is also more than happy to let Solas take the bill. The waitress’s eyes linger curiously on her vallaslin, but she remains cordial and friendly nonetheless.

As they wait for Solas’s card to be returned, he pulls out his cellphone and texts something, looking highly satisfied.
“Forgive me,” he says, sliding it back into his pocket. “I asked an old colleague for a favor and she finally got back to me. I know you spent all day at the museum, but if you return there with me, you’ll see something truly magnificent.”

“But I saw every inch of that museum today.”

The corners of his mouth curl up slyly. “Not every inch.”

The entire time Solas leads her down the maze of hallways in the back of the museum, Ellana expects some laser to get tripped, the cops summoned, and the two of them thrown in the back of a cruiser at any moment. But the halls are mostly empty and quiet, the offices downstairs dark. Finally he comes to a large set of double doors, a woman dressed in a security uniform standing beside them.

“Good to see you, Solas,” she says. “They’ve moved it up against the far back wall.”

“Thank you so much, Ira,” he says. “I appreciate it on such short notice.”

“Any time. It’s a shame it’s not on display yet. Just call for me when you’re done. I’ll be in the control room.”

She unlocks the doors and Solas leads Ellana through them.

Inside lies a veritable wonderland. A historian’s wet dream. Huge shelves tower in rows, covered in carefully boxed artifacts and rolled paintings.

“How much stuff is in here?” she says, her head swiveling around.

“Thousands of artifacts, sculptures, jewelry, and paintings are housed here. Some are part of rotating exhibits, some are being shipped back and forth between other museums, some are still in need of repair or restoration. Others still are waiting for their own exhibit. Come. You won’t believe your eyes.”

He navigates his way through the shelves as a long-time native until they come to the back of the room, where the bigger artifacts are stored, finally stopping at long, tall rectangle shape hidden underneath a giant canvas.

“You’ll have to help me uncover it,” he says.

“What is it?”

At over six feet tall and at least twenty feet long, it’s way too big to be a canvas painting. Yet a flat rectangle would make for a boring sculpture.

“You’ll see. On the count of three.”

They pull down the tarp and unveiled beneath is what looks like piece of ancient wall, covered entirely in an elaborately painted mural.

Ellana nearly screams.

“Holy shit.”

It’s not just any mural, it’s The Mural. The one of Fen’Harel that graced the cover of Solas’s book, the mural that made the rest of the world sit up and take notice of Arlathan, at least for a little bit. If
seeing *The Banks of the Seheron* felt like meeting a celebrity, then this mural is a religious experience.

She’s struck by the intensity of the colors, despite being at least a thousand years old.

“This is not on display,” says Solas. “You can take a closer look.”

Ellana glances over at him before stepping closer to the mural. The details are extraordinary – the crisp lines of the triangles in the background, bright copper against the navy blue, the smudged lines of the wolf’s rib cage, the intricate line of dots the create the halo around the wolf’s head, the lines around his three eyes. The man, Fen’Harel himself, seems almost like an afterthought, despite his position leading the wolf.

She darts her hand out and brushes her fingers against the Dread Wolf’s rib cage, right where his heart should be.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?”

Ellana jerks her hand away, feeling like a criminal. But Solas steps up behind her and pats the side of the Dread Wolf like an old friend.

“We really shouldn’t be touching it,” Ellana says reluctantly.

“No, we should not. But it survived a thousand years of dirt and decay. One press of your hand, the opportunity to feel real history underneath your fingertips, will not hurt it.”

Carefully, guiltily, she traces the barest tip of her finger along a dotted white line of the Dread Wolf’s halo. This mural sat in Arlathan during Fen’Harel’s rule. It witnessed the fall of the kingdom, the crumbling of the remains, the enslavement of her people. She knows the history of her people, but it happened so long ago and so far away, remembered only in fragments, that it doesn’t feel real most of the time.

But real Arlathanian hands touched this wall, carefully covered it in plaster, lovingly painted these details. Faced with such undeniable proof, the reality of her history drops sudden and heavy upon her. It makes her breath catch, her eyes sting.

She ducks her head down, embarrassed at such an emotional display, especially when it didn’t happen last summer with any of her discoveries. But when she looks back up again, after swallowing heavily and blinking rapidly, she sees only understanding in Solas’s gaze.

“I’ve always been scared that Arlathan was made up,” she says. “Some kind of fairy tale to make us feel better about the kind of lives we have to live now. It sounds too good to be true, the idea that elves were once on top of the world instead of crushed under it. But looking at this . . . it’s impossible to deny it, that we were something great, at least for a little while.”

“I wept the day I discovered it,” he says quietly. “The building had been buried under so much dirt and ash, I had wondered if anything could have survived. But since my first glimpse of it, I barely slept or ate until I uncovered the whole thing. It’s what inspired me to write my book. I could not rest until I had laid out all the pieces.”

“Why the hell isn’t this on display,” she demands. “Why does it have to hide in the corner of the fucking basement?”

Solas throws her a look that says *you know exactly why*. “It was a nightmare to get it out of Tevinter’s hands in the first place, and they only let us have it here because this museum is more
qualified to restore it. But it is strictly on loan. Ideally it would be in an exhibit to ancient elvhen mural technique, but there aren’t enough recovered pieces to create one.”

“I guess you better hurry your ass up and get back out there,” she says, the corner of her mouth quirking up.

“I would enjoy the company, if you’re up for more hard, manual labor.”

Running around the deep forests of Tevinter, discovering long forgotten pieces of her own history, solidifying the reality of her stories one ruin at a time, sounds too good be anything more than a fantasy.

But in that moment Ellana wants it more than anything.

“Just say the word,” she says. “I’ll find my way there.”

Solas drops her off at her hotel. They stand in the lobby for a moment, prolonging the goodbye. Just like that moment in the airport, Ellana feels reluctant to see him go.

“Any more museum outings before you go?” Solas asks. “The Chantry Historical Tour is always fun.”

Despite the obvious teasing in his tone, Ellana still grimaces. “I would rather chew my own foot off, but thanks. No, I’m taking myself on my own historical tour, checking out all my old haunts.”

“Looking to see how much has changed in your absence?”

“Something like that.”

An idea starts to take form. She’s spent all of their time together in his territory – both the delicate and backbreaking realm of archaeology and the elaborate, sanitized bubble of waterfront Val Royeaux. Maybe it’s time he got a taste of hers.

“I know you’ve got work, but if you have more time off, you’re always welcome to tag along,” she offers and immediately is hit with a wave of self-consciousness.

What is she thinking? Why would someone like Solas – older and wealthy and professional – take time away from his very distinguished job just to run around looking at old apartments with a college student?

“I mean, it’s not going to be that interesting or anything, just really for nostalgia for me, but –

“I would love to.”

“ – would totally understand if you have more important things to do, it’s really not a big deal – wait what?”

She stares at his slightly bemused expression. He hadn’t even hesitated. “You’re serious? You want to come?”

“I’m an archaeologist,” he says with a slight smile. “When am I not interested in discovering the past? What time should I meet you?”

“Uh . . . noon? Is noon good?” she asks.
“I shall see you at noon.”

Solas shows up in the lobby at exactly twelve on the dot, dressed in a collared shirt and blazer over dark denim jeans, and this is not going to work at all.

“I cannot be seen with you looking like this,” she tells him.

His eyebrows raise. “I apologize, my three-piece tuxedo is at the dry cleaners.”

She rolls her eyes. “Opposite problem, idiot. You look like a mugger’s wet dream. We are going to have to dress you way down.”

He looks back down at his outfit. “I can go back home and change if you want.”

“We can do it in my room. It’s just on the second floor.”

Just as she gets to her door, Dr. Sten steps out into the hallway, holding a to-go coffee in one hand and a book in the other, reading glasses perched on his nose.

“Good morning, Ellana,” he says and hesitates a split second before bowing his head to Solas. “Dr. Felassan.”

Though his expression barely changes, Ellana can read the assumptions broadcasted in the fractional lift of his eyebrows and motherfucking Creators she can only imagine how this looks to him.

“Good morning, Dr. Sten!” the pitch of her voice rises sharp in her mortification, which makes her sound even more guilty.

He says nothing more and continues on his way towards the elevator. Ellana unlocks the door and shoves Solas inside before slamming it shut behind her.

“Oh my gods.” She covers her eyes with her hand. “Oh my gods.”

“Your face is very red. Are you alright?”

“Do you have any idea what the hell that just looked like to him?” she hisses, uncovering her eyes to glare at him.

The corner of his mouth lifts up.

“You’re the one who dragged me to your rooms to undress me.”

There is just enough of a lilt in his voice for Ellana to know he’s fucking with her, and yet she flushes even harder.

“Shut up. I’m trying to save us from getting robbed, okay. I said to dress casual last night!”

He stares at her. “I’m wearing jeans and a cotton shirt.”

Ellana takes a deep breath so she doesn’t throttle him. “You’re wearing a blazer! The only people who wear blazers casually are hipsters and rich people. Not to mention that giant, fancy-ass designer watch. You’re practically begging people to pickpocket you.”

“Ah. I hadn’t considered the watch.”
He unclasps it from his wrist and tucks it into his pocket.

“Any other suggestions?”

“Lose the blazer, first of all. And then try untucking and unbuttoning your shirt.”

Solas obeys, and Ellana catches herself staring at the way his long fingers undo the buttons on his blazer and forces herself to look away.

“Is this better?” he asks and she looks up from her fingernails.

With the button-down wrinkled slightly at the bottom and the plain white undershirt peeking from behind it, this might actually work out.

“Yeah. Just one more thing.”

She steps in and folds up one of his sleeves to the elbow. Solas takes care of the other sleeve.

“Now you look normal,” she says.

Solas looks down at himself and shakes his head. “I don’t think I dressed quite like this even when I was in secondary school. Forgive me, I truly thought the jeans were enough.”

“Yeah, well, you also think 25 sovs is a cheap sandwich, so I really should have known better.”

When they step back out into the lobby, Sten sits on one of the couches by the fish tank, book in his lap. He doesn’t look up at them, but Ellana can feel his eyes on her as they’re leaving. Watching Solas enter her room is bad enough, but watching them leave it with Solas’s outfit drastically changed is horrifying.

“Yeah, I am never going to live this down,” she mutters to herself.

“Judging from the brief moment we were up there, his assumption is either highly flattering or incredibly insulting,” Solas muses.

She elbows him hard enough to hear him grunt.

The first stop is her old apartment building. Solas offers his car, but Ellana insists on the subway.

“We have to be authentic,” she says. “Besides, I’m sure someone would try to hotwire your car in like five minutes.”

It’s been almost three years since Ellana left and at first the subway is weird. She forgot how loud it can get, the strange smells, the tide of people that comes and goes. Solas’s face looks curiously blank, as if trying to hide his discomfort. He probably takes taxis everywhere if he doesn’t drive.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you from the scary weirdos,” she whispers to him.

“After hearing of your exploits with Cassandra, I have complete faith in you,” he murmurs back.

The jostle of the subway car occasionally shoves her backwards into his chest, but his hands steady her each time, a gentleman’s touch on her waist or shoulder.

Her old apartment lies just a few blocks from the subway stop. A weird sense of deja-vu starts
blooming as her feet take her down the old familiar path. She has to stop herself from mindlessly opening the gate that leads into the courtyard and up the second staircase to the right.

“That window was mine,” she says, pointing up to the third floor. “One left from the end there.”

“You know, judging from the little you’ve said about this place, I was expecting something much more sinister,” he remarks.

Ellana looks up at the building. The brick was probably a cheery yellowy beige at some point, but time has left a grimy grey smudge on everything, including the rusted wrought iron balconies. The buildings are tall enough that not much sunlight reaches the small courtyard. Still, the place has an air of quiet dignity to it, and it looks sturdy and clean. No garbage in the courtyard, the trees that grow on the sides stand healthy and tall.

“This was not the original place I lived in,” she said. “Not even I would to set foot back in that part of the city, much less drag you there.”

“And what was that place like?”

Ellana shudders. “Infested. The whole place was full of roaches and mice. Not to mention mildew crawling on all the walls. But when I first showed up here, I had no idea how expensive it was to live here and I blew my entire savings in like a week just trying to find a job. That apartment was the only place I could get into with what I had left and at such short notice. Thank the gods I was only there a few months.”

“How did you get out?”

“I found Alistair.”

Ellana smiles faintly at the memory, which never fails to embarrass Alistair, despite his many attempts to edit retellings of it in his favor.

“He lived across the hall from me, but I barely saw him. One day I was coming back home from work and I just heard this scream come from his apartment. His door was open so I ran in there, thinking he was, like, getting stabbed or something. All I see is this grown man standing on top of the kitchen table with a frying pan and the biggest fucking cockroach I have ever seen crawling around on the wall. It had to have been like six inches long minimum.”

Despite how stupid this story must sound, Solas looks riveted and not in a sarcastic way. “Did you kill it?”

“Well, yeah. I grabbed the frying pan from his hands and beat the shit out of the wall. It took about five minutes for the thing to die, though. Seriously, it was an evil mutant cockroach. After that Alistair bought me dinner as a thank you and before we were done we had already made plans to room up and get the fuck out of there.”

“Is he still there now? We could go say hello.”

Ellana shakes her head. “He joined the Wardens not that long after I went to Skyhold. The apartment was leased out years ago.”

A deep sense of melancholy swoops over her, looking at a place she used to call home and not being able to set foot inside it. Everything looks the same on the outside, yet everything is different on the inside.
Solas looks out over the courtyard. “Funny, how fate seems to put people in your path the moment you need them.”

Ellana takes one last look at the place before continuing down the street. She finds herself narrating each place as she passes, sharing stories of her life. The hot dog vendor they ate at every pay day. The bodega that supplied Alistair’s noodle addiction. The gas station whose milk crates they stole to make coffee tables and dressers.

The memories come tumbling out of her mouth as if it had happened last week, stuff she hadn’t even thought about in years – like the park where Alistair got propositioned at and freaked out so badly he claimed Ellana to be his girlfriend. The ice cream place where he and Ellana celebrated her exam results.

Eventually her footsteps lead them to Calenhad. Because of course.

“Come on, I’m thirsty.”

For the first time, Solas looks at his environment with some trepidation. The only thing that distinguishes Calenhad from any other random brick storefront is the little wooden sign that sticks out from the door. It’s a place that relies more on word-of-mouth reputation for business than décor. The inside is dim, even at two in the afternoon, with a smattering of patrons that Ellana still vaguely recognizes.

“Don’t worry, it looks sketchy as hell but I’ve never had a problem.”

“It can’t be any worse than the Hanged Man,” says Solas.

But she catches the look of discomfort when his shoe sticks to the floor and smothers a grin.

She makes a beeline to the empty bar and orders a beer.

“And whatever he’s having,” she says, nodding to Solas.

She expects him to order bottled water or a spritzer or even nothing, but Solas tacks on a second beer for himself. They clink their bottles together and Ellana can’t help it, she has to watch Solas tip the long neck of the bottle to his lips and take a sip. It’s almost unbelievable how easily he does so, as if he’d had a thousand beers before.

Well, he was Dorian’s roommate so maybe he has.

“This is where Alistair used to work,” she said. She points to a seat a few spots down from Solas. “He never drank, but he was a really popular bartender. The only thing he couldn’t do was fancy tricks. I don’t know how many bottles I’ve watched him smash trying to juggle. He would even practice with empty bottles at our apartment. The only reason why they didn’t fire him was because he was stupidly handsome and therefore disgustedly popular. Not that he was ever really aware of it.”

It feels weird to be here without Alistair. She keeps expecting to see his face behind the bar and it cuts a little every time she sees someone else.

“You know, so far all your memories here have been of him,” Solas notes.

“He was basically my only friend,” she says. “I didn’t have a lot of time or opportunity to make others.
“Did you ever want more from him?”

Ellana almost chokes on her beer. “What? Oh Creators, no.”

“Really? He seems a good candidate.”

Something in Solas’s eyes contradicts the nonchalance of his tone.

“He’s an amazing candidate. And he’s going to make some other person deliriously happy, but he was more like a . . . like a clanmate – a brother – than someone I would date.”

“And who is someone you would date?”

Judging by the alarmed expression that immediately follows this question, Solas probably didn’t mean to ask it out loud.

“I apologize,” he says. “That’s crossing the line. It was a slip of the tongue, you don’t have to answer.”

“What line?” she asks. “You’re not my boss anymore. We’re friends now, right?”

“I suppose,” he says slowly, but he has not relaxed. “Even so, the friendship is new, and it’s a very personal question.”

“I get asked it all the time, it seems. All my friends seem to be really fucking nosy about it, so you’d fit right in.”

“Oh?”

“It’s apparently inconceivable to people that I don’t want to bang any of my hot friends. That I can be surrounded by single, attractive people and not throw myself at any one of them. And yeah, almost all my friends are attached to someone else, so I guess it is weird.”

“Some people just don’t have those desires,” Solas says.

“The thing is, I do have them, sort of. I mean, I am definitely aware of how attractive some of my friends are.”

The memory of Zevran kissing her in the Hanged Man for Varric’s bet flashes through her, and even now after so long she can still feel the slight zing from it. And then, of course, there’s Solas in all his long-fingered, bright-eyed, and deep voiced glory. She’s definitely not immune to that.

“But I don’t get the . . . the giggly, jangly, mushy crush feelings. I had them one time with my best friend growing up, but that never went anywhere and it’s never happened again. So the answer to your question is who the fuck knows? I have no idea what triggers my brain to consider someone like a clanmate versus someone I want to date. It just hits me one day.”

“I see.”

Solas takes a long sip of his drink, eyes staring forward as if he’s trying to process it all.

“Sorry. I might have overshared there,” she says, biting her lip.

He shakes his head. “You gave me an honest and thorough answer to a question I had no business in asking. You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”
Still, he looks rather lost in thought, so Ellana jostles his shoulder.

“What about you? You’re intelligent, you have a kick-ass job, you’re good looking – what’s your excuse for not having someone?”

“Who says that I don’t?”

It’s delivered with such perfect seriousness that Ellana almost believes it. But the glint in his eye ruins it.

“You’re hilarious,” she says.

He gives her a crooked smile. “Between the months spent in remote places all over Thedas, teaching sporadically at Skyhold, the long hours spent on my research, my ‘kick-ass job’ is not very conducive to a relationship. I gave up a long time ago.”

“Does it ever get lonely?”

Ellana might not have a romantic partner, but she’s got too many friends to really feel the sting of the loss. But Solas doesn’t seem the type to have many friends, and the few he does have seem to all be back at Skyhold.

“I suppose,” he says softly. “It is a feeling I have grown so used to that I no longer notice it.”

Well, that’s sure as hell depressing. Even when she was stuck here, the first time away from home and living in a kind of poverty she had no idea existed, she still had Alistair. Solas looks a little melancholy so Ellana drains the rest of her beer.

“Alright, we’re moving on to the next stop of the tour.”

Stepping into the chaos of the arcade machines from the quiet dullness of the street outside almost feels like walking into another world. At least, that’s what she had first thought the first time Alistair brought her here. Ellana had never even heard of an arcade before, and the flashing lights and cacophony of fake gun shots and zingy beeps and the thunderous smacks of the skee balls almost overwhelmed her.

It was a place she and Alistair quickly grew to love. At least a couple times a month they would sneak down here with quarters they had saved or found. Ellana got very good at skee ball, and Alistair had some kind of preternatural knack for the games that relied on timing.

Solas’s gaze jerks around at every new light and sound, looking exactly as she had felt the first time she stepped inside.

“Been a long time since you’ve gone to an arcade?” she teases. “Like, what, a century give or take?”

“Give or take a century, yes,” he replies. “This is my first one.”

“Not even as a kid?”

“No,” he says tersely.

There’s a lot of . . . something packed in that ‘no’ but Ellana doesn’t press it.

“To be honest, I hadn’t either until Alistair brought me here. We didn’t have anything like this in the
Dales. But it’s a lot of fun. You game?”

He bows his head. “As always, I follow your lead.”

The first stop is, of course, the change machine. It feels good to pull out a few crisp sovereign bills and not worry about the loss instead of the crumpled bills and careful hoard of loose change she and Alistair managed to scrimp together. As much as she loves the arcade, it’s easy to get caught up and spend more than you ever intended. But now she could throw sovs at this place until it closed if she really wanted to.

It’s a good feeling.

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they play games. Alistair, for instance, almost hates winning. He gets embarrassed by it and weirdly guilty, always citing luck and talking up Ellana’s own skill rather than taking any credit for himself.

At first she thinks Solas might be the same. He shrugs off each embarrassing loss at the racing games, the zombie shooting game, the street fighting game, categorizing the loss as inevitable due to his lack of experience and always happy to try out the next one.

But Ellana doesn’t buy it. There’s no way that someone like Solas, who hangs on to the belief that he’s right with a tenacity that borders on the stupid, would not be competitive. She sees glimmers of it with skee ball, which Solas masters in about five seconds and spends at least three sovs worth of change trying to better Ellana’s old high score.

“Of course you’d be good at this,” she says. “It’s such a grandpa game.”

Solas hefts the ball in hand for a second before rolling it gracefully up the lane and into the one hundred thousand point bullseye in the corner.

“This game is nothing but simple physics – ergo it makes sense,” he says, rolling the next ball. “Unlike the arbitrary reaction of a button press.”

“Oh?” Ellana cocks her head to the side. “You want physics? I’ll give you physics.”

After Solas uses the last of the skee balls, Ellana takes him to her favorite game in the arcade: air hockey. The hum of the hockey table alone brings back flashbacks, and she closes her eyes a moment before setting the puck on the table.

It immediately starts floating towards Solas, who watches it with some fascination. Ellana corrals it back towards the middle with the striker.

“The game is simple: hit the puck into the other player’s goal while trying to block shots into your own goal. The first player to seven points wins. Ready?”

“I think so.”

Ellana strikes the puck as hard and fast as she can, and it flies straight into Solas’s goal before he can even blink. He stares down at the table in shock for a second and then lifts his gaze up to her.

“That’s a point for me,” she says blithely.

“For now,” he replies.
He fishes out the puck, sets it back onto the table and immediately strikes it. But Ellana’s ready and she blocks it and sends it straight back into his goal again.

“Two to nothing,” she says, and this time she can’t stop the corner of her mouth from smirking any more than she can stop the urge to goad him. “Maybe physics isn’t simple enough for you.”

It doesn’t work. His face remains placid, but it feels like the kind of serenity the river has when the current runs strong underneath it.

Solas ends up losing by six points – he gets in one lucky shot near the end and doesn’t even gloat about it. But she can tell that the peaceful expression on his face is getting forced.

“Don’t feel too bad. It’s like what you said earlier – you just have less experience than me. And some people just don’t have the reflexes for this kind of game. We can go back to skee ball if you want.”

Solas sets the puck back onto the table with a hard thunk and there is fire in his eyes.

“If it is my lack of experience, then that is easily remedied.”

Her suspicions prove correct: Solas fights for victory with a single-minded intensity that is almost scary. They both end up lunging halfway across the table to hit the puck, the smack of it almost loud enough to echo. He loses the second game, but only just barely, and by now Ellana’s own competitive spirit is roaring in her ears.

Ellana usually doesn’t hate losing. There’s no challenge in winning everything all the time and she really only cares that she gave her best effort. Not to mention that winning against Alistair feels more like kicking a puppy than any kind of accomplishment.

But losing against Solas and seeing that stupid glint in his eyes, the barest hint of a smirk around his lips, while he fakes a humble attitude she knows he doesn’t mean at all, is intolerable. There’s just something in her that spoils for a fight when he’s involved, no matter what it is.

They play five more games, stopping only because the change has run out and there is a group of kids giving them increasingly venomous glares as they wait their turn. She wins four of them, but only just barely, and Solas accepts his overall defeat with grace and just a touch of disgruntlement.

“What happens next?” he asks.

“Now we count our tickets and get our prizes.”

Ellana feeds the tickets into the machine slowly and methodically until it eats the last one and prints out a receipt – five hundred and twenty three.

“Quite impressive for what little we did.” Solas remarks.

Ellana snorts. “This is nothing. The inflation on ticket currency is ridiculous.”

Indeed, when they go to survey the ticket counter, Solas’s eyebrows rise higher and higher as he inspects the goods.

“See anything you like?” she asks.

“Not yet, but I’m sure I’ll find something.”

There’s something infinitely amusing in the bend of Solas’s back as he seriously considers the
bouncy balls, miniature plastic skateboards, and random candy.

Ellana usually just grabs as much candy as her share will allow, having zero interest in the toys. But this time she hovers over a box of cheap plastic key chain flashlights, wanting something more permanent as a reminder.

After much internal debate and careful consideration, Ellana settles for the flashlight key chain and a watermelon hard candy. Solas takes a rubber coin purse and a piece of taffy. They take their prizes to the concession stand.

“For something I could have bought on my own for a fraction of the cost, I feel strangely accomplished,” he says.

“That’s how they get you,” she says. “I remember Alistair had saved up for months to earn this stupid lava lamp they wanted five thousand tickets for, even though you could go down to the discount store and buy one for ten sovs. The day he finally got it you would have thought it was his birthday. He displayed it in the living room until I left.”

Solas glances at his watch. “It’s nearly six. Would you like to get something to eat?”

“Sure,” she says. “But this time it’s my treat and we are eating . . . there.” She points over the collection of plastic booths gathered around the concession stand.

To his credit, Solas does not even flinch.

“They have really good burgers and fries,” she says.

“You’re paying me back for the bistro, aren’t you?”

“Come on, it will be a culinary adventure. You probably won’t get food poisoning.”

Solas orders his burger with nary a complaint, though he can’t hide his dubious expression when it arrives. Ellana splurges and buys a basket of fried mozzarella sticks, something extra she rarely could afford when she used to come here. She carefully watches Solas’s expression as he takes his first bite as she dips her mozzarella stick in marinara sauce. He chews thoughtfully and then cocks his head to the side.

“I must admit, the quality of this burger is excellent. Thank you, Ellana.”

“No problem.”

They eat companionably. Ellana gets Solas to try one of her cheese sticks because of course he’s never had one before. She can’t help the grin the comes out when he politely asks for a second. Something in her chest warms at the thought of him enjoying something so strange to him and so familiar to her. It almost makes her wish she could take him with her to Wycombe, though that would likely lead to a disaster that ends in his murder.

“Do you ever miss your life here?” he asks.

Ellana has to think about that, swiping the last of her fries in ketchup.

“A little bit, I guess,” she says. “It could have been a lot worse.”

“Yes, it could have,” he murmurs, almost to himself. “I suppose, in a way, I’m a little envious of it.”

“Envious of what?”
“The simplicity of it. Being able to see and appreciate the small moments of happiness.”

Ellana rolls her eyes at his wistful tone.

“Oh gods, Solas, please don’t be one of those people.”

He looks taken aback, blinking owlishly.

“And who are those people?”

“People who, like, romanticize being poor because they have no idea what being poor is actually like. Trust me, there is nothing simple about trying to budget out food and bills and rent, especially when your income relies on tips. We had to pay out the ass just to have an apartment that wasn’t infested with something. Not to mention how much stress working three different jobs put us under because no matter how much he and I worked, we were always one small emergency away from being homeless. And that fear gnawed on us constantly. Even though Alistair and I found ways to be happy, it sucked pretty much all the time.”

Solas looks a little stricken. “I see. I’m sorry, I spoke ignorantly.”

“I’m not mad,” Ellana says, waving him off. “It’s just the kind of life you can’t understand until you lived it. I mean, even in the Dales if you needed something and couldn’t get it, your clan always had your back. But up here, you’re alone. I thought I was prepared to make it on my own when I left, but I had no idea what that actually felt like.”

Solas studies the remainder of his french fries for a moment. “I may not understand poverty, but I do know isolation,” he says finally. “My younger self was almost proud at how little I cared for the attachment to others. I had no idea how much of yourself loneliness erodes until I met Dorian and I couldn’t be alone even if I wanted to be.”

He smiles, small and crookedly, at some memory, and then it fades. “Even so, I still find myself struggling with how to be around people, how to relate to them, how to let them in.”

“You don’t seem to have that problem with me,” she points out.

Solas huffs a laugh. “Really? As many times as I have misunderstood you, misspoken to you, made you furious, and you can still say that?”

Ellana shrugs. “And just as often we’ve had good days, good conversations. We just spent two days together and the only argument we’ve had was over a sandwich. That’s pretty good for us.”

“You know almost nothing about me,” he says, almost bitterly, but Ellana just shrugs.

“I know enough. And when you’re ready, I’ll know the rest.”

For a long moment he just looks at her, his expression deep and impenetrable.

“Thank you.”

“That’s what friends do,” she says. “Are you done? ‘Cause I got one more place to show you.”

The Orlais National Library is just as grand and intricate and almost forbidding as she remembers it. By now closing time is only an hour away and the place is mostly empty. Ellana makes a beeline straight for the table she always sits at. Solas trails a few steps behind. She expects him to rattle off
some facts about the architecture or the kind of antique books they keep in the Restoration section, but he stays oddly quiet.

Not that she blames him. There is such a hushed dignity about the place that it almost renders the \textit{Please Remain Quiet} sign unnecessary.

She slides into the seat that she had been sitting in when Abelas first approached her, feeling a little ridiculous at the ceremonial feeling of doing so.

Solas stands behind the seat that Abelas had occupied, hands resting on the back.

“So this is where it started, then?” he asks.

“Yep. I was just sitting here, minding my own business, when this pissed off looking Dalish elf in a tailored suit showed up out of nowhere with a briefcase and asked for me by name.”

“The way you’ve described him, Abelas doesn’t seem very friendly.”

“Besides Dr. Sten, he might be the scariest person I’ve ever met,” Ellana says.

“What were your first thoughts after hearing his offer? It must have sounded like pure fantasy.”

“Well, at first I thought I was getting sued. I was desperately trying to remember if I had pissed off any customers, but I dealt with so many a day, I couldn’t remember. Then I thought Alistair was pranking me. It took until halfway through my first semester to be convinced it wasn’t some elaborate scam.”

“I’m surprised you took the deal at all.”

Ellana looks around the library, remembering how it took her months to feel like she wasn’t a dirty trespasser in such a pristine and beautiful building. Remembering how hard it was to leave it for her tiny apartment and exhausting shifts.

“I was more afraid of being stuck in that life, watching my dreams slip away year after year, than I was of getting conned. It ended up being worth the risk, but . . . the only reason why I get to live in Skyhold, getting an education, having enough free time to have friends, never having to worry about where I sleep and what I eat, is because of someone else’s charity. It’s not like I did anything on my own.”

That fact still sits bitter in her chest, a small voice in the back of her head that she tries to ignore. Her Dalish upbringing instilled a value of community, of helping one another, but there’s a difference in accepting help and \textit{needing} help. Now she’ll never know if she’s capable of making it on her own.

“I don’t see that way,” he says softly. “He must have seen some potential in you in order to spark such generosity.”

“I have no idea how. All I did was read. It’s not that special.”

Solas gives her a strange look.

“Have you asked him?”

Ellana shrugs. “Honestly, I’m not sure that I want to know. I don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied with the answer, especially after all this time.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps what’s important is what came after, not what started it.”
She considers everything that did come after, everything that she has now, which is so much more than she ever hoped.

“Maybe you’re right,” she says, getting up. “There’s one last thing I want to check and then we can head back.”

Ellana traces a path that she has walked a hundred times. It’s practically muscle memory at this point, her feet carrying her without her really having to look. Not even the temptation of the new book section can keep her from seeking out the library’s copy of *The Rise and Fall of Arlathan*.

It’s still there and the same one she used to read. Ellana can tell because on page two hundred and fifty seven is a small coffee stain from when Alistair told her a joke while she was drinking. She flips through the pages of it almost reverently.

It’s good to know, despite all the change she has gone through in the last few years, that some things still remain.

“You know, you can be an arrogant son of a bitch so I never properly thanked you,” she says, turning to him.

He’s waited so quietly and patiently behind her that she almost forgot he was there. Solas’s head cocks to the side.

“Thanked me? For what?”

“For writing this book. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve read it. Knowing that I came from something important and magnificent got me through so much of other people’s racist bullshit. It helped me hold my head up high. I don’t know what I would have done without it.”

Solas blinks and looks rather thunderstruck. “That is, quite frankly, the highest compliment I’ve ever received about my work. It’s what I wanted for people like us when I wrote it.”

*People like us*. As wide as the gulf between their experiences can be sometimes, they come from the same place, they share the same history. They have a connection that no one else can share.

Ellana smiles and ducks her head, feeling suddenly shy.

“Yeah, well . . . it’s good work.”

Gods that sounds lame. Ellana re-shelves the book so she doesn’t have to look at his reaction and then they head out of the stacks.

A thought occurs to her as they head out into the evening sunlight.

“Do you spend every winter here when you’re not on dig sites?” she asks.

“Depends on what I found. If there is not much to study or categorize then I return to Skyhold to teach.”

“So it’s possible we were both here at the same time?”

Solas stumbles on the edge of the sidewalk and Ellana grabs his shoulder to steady him.

“You left three years ago, correct?” he asks.

“Yeah.”
“I was teaching at Skyhold. I started the Emerald Graves job the summer before your first semester, actually.”

“We just barely missed each other.”

Solas nods. “Like ships in the night.”

It was a silly thought, but Ellana finds herself vaguely disappointed that it isn’t true.

They say their goodbyes at the front entrance to the hotel. Ellana is not risking another look from Dr. Sten.

“Thank you for allowing me to be your tag-along today.”

“And hey, we didn’t get mugged!” Ellana says, grinning. “Thanks for coming along. I know it’s not your usual scene, but I was happy for the company.”

“I always enjoy learning new things, expanding my horizons.”

“Gods, you make it sound like I took you on an educational field trip.”

“In some ways, it was,” he points out, the corner of his mouth twitching. “But I also had fun. I would very much like a rematch at the air hockey table some time in the future.”

“I’m always happy to beat you again,” she says, grinning.

“Your overconfidence will be the key to your downfall.”

“We’ll see.”

She leans forward and hugs him, which he accepts with only slight hesitation.

“I’ll text you when I get home tomorrow,” she says, pulling away.

“Please do.”

“Bye, Solas.” She chucks him underneath the chin. “See you around.”

He captures her hand and presses a brief kiss to her knuckles, like some kind of prince in a fairy tale.

“See you around, Ellana.”

He’d been on her mind all day, seeping into her memories. She had done a good job locking away the part that misses Alistair and focusing on the present, but today it all came flooding out. She lies on her bed, flipping through the pictures she had taken today.

Ellana 8:25 pm

Look where I went to today

[attachment: image]
Alistair 8:27 pm

Sweet Maker, Ellana

You didn’t get kicked out of Skyhold, did you?

Ellana 8:28

wow thats ur first thought

thanks for the vote of confidence

Alistair 8:29

punching people is generally frowned upon in polite society

and I know it’s one of your favorite things to do

Ellana 8:29 pm

I did not get kicked out

im here on an art trip and I thought I would revisit some places

Alistair 8:30 pm

Oho! Look at you, becoming cultured

going on fancy art trips

did you see the museum?

I know you’ve always wanted to

Ellana 8:31 pm

yep!

It was amazing, like I thought it would be
couldn’t stop thinking about you tho

sorry I don’t text you as often as I should

I still miss you

Alistair 8:32 pm

<3

I know

I’m just as guilty

Miss you too!

You free to talk?

Ellana stays up way too late talking to Alistair on the phone. They trade old memories and update each other on the state of their lives. Alistair expresses disbelief that the arcade is still open.

“Those arcade games are already at least as old as we are,” he says. “And I swear to God, the owner is bribing someone in health services because that kitchen violates about fifteen codes.”

“Yes, but the burgers are still killer.”

“Both literally and figuratively,” he points out wryly.

The sound of his voice and the slow edge to his sarcasm, his drawn out chuckles, both soothe and provoke the sore part of her heart that misses him.

“You know, we should really stop waiting so long to talk to each other,” she says.

“You’re the one who can’t pen me into her busy schedule,” he teases.

“Bullshit. You’re the one who’s got fifty million restrictions on when you can talk to people or relax or wipe your own ass.”

“We’re both guilty. It’s alright, Ellana. Life happens.”

“I know. I still miss you. And, you know, I always want to push those kinds of thoughts away, but they always end up coming back and biting me in the ass.”

“Awww, you’re growing up. I’m so proud. But if you want, we can make some kind of monthly gossip date. If you can find the time in your busy social scene.”

“If you can get permission from your nannies,” she counters.

Alistair laughs and it’s like a needle prick in her chest.

“Third weekend of every month, how’s that?”

“I think I can make the time.”
Ellana gets about three hours of sleep before she has to get ready for her early train back to Skyhold, but it’s worth it. She sleeps on the ride back home, and when she wakes up from her nap, she shows Dr. Sten the photos of the elvhen pin-up paintings and the statue of Fen’Harel she found in the Emerald Graves. To her gratitude, he makes no mention of her and Solas.

“These are significant finds indeed,” he says instead. “I am very impressed. Have you considered this as a career?”

Ellana hesitates. “Yeah, but I’m not sure how . . . sustainable it is as a job,” she says.

She braces herself for the inevitable “but you should pursue your dreams!” conversation, but Dr. Sten surprises her.

“I understand the hesitance. There is a great inequality of class in the Arts and Humanities, not to mention that the fields are highly competitive and underfunded. But there are many volunteer programs for archaeology available all throughout Thedas should you ever want to further your experience.”

“I will definitely look into that,” she says, smiling. “Thank you.”

There may be hope for her yet.

When she gets home, the first thing she does (after hugging Josephine) is place the Banks of the Seheron magnet on her fridge.
The miniatures exhibit that Josephine loves is based on a real exhibit in the Chicago Art Institute called the Thorne Miniature Rooms and they are super super cool and worth checking out.
"I'm going to update faster in the summer!"

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

*Insert Sponge Bob Meme*

“No. No. Absolutely not. This schedule is utterly ludicrous, Ellana. You’ll lose your sanity.”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “That’s what you said my first semester. I’m a senior now. I can handle twenty-four hours.”

“At what cost, darling? These aren’t bullshit prereq classes. These are senior level courses. Some of them are prep for grad school. You will have no sleep and no social life to speak of. You’ll be spending your last year here begging for it to be over.”

Ellana helps herself, rather vindictively, to another one of Dorian’s precious raspberry jam cookies. “I’m in one of the most incredible learning institutions in the world, qualified and financially able to take so many fascinating classes. All the knowledge is, like, right there, waiting for me. I’m never going to be in this position again. I have to take advantage of it.”

“Maker’s breath, Ellana. If there was such a thing as an academic lush, it’d be you.”

But Dorian taps his pencil against his lips as he considers her offered schedule and then turns abruptly to the computer to look something up.

“What are you summer plans?” he asks finally.

“I don’t know. Why?”

Actually, she’s secretly hoping that Solas will invite her out to the Emerald Graves again. That, or Josephine taking her to Antiva.

“Some of these classes are offered this summer. Now, summer classes are highly condensed. You’ll have three-hour classes, three days a week, for four weeks. It’s not easy, but it will free up some space for you next semester and you will hate your life considerably less. However, you can kiss any kind of summer travel plans goodbye.”

He circles three of her proposed classes and writes out the times for each one. There’s some overlap, but the classes don’t happen concurrently; they’re spread out over the entire summer break.

Ellana bites her lip, considering. On one hand, this is her last summer before she graduates, and she has yet to do any kind of fun college-kid style vacation. Then again, she doesn’t want to spend her last year stressed out and overworked.

“Can I think about it?” she asks.
“Sure, but don’t take more than a week or so. Summer classes fill up surprisingly early. You’re not the only nerd at Skyhold, you know.”

To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject:

So these past few days I was back in Val Royeaux! Dr. Sten invited me to an art trip usually reserved for senior art majors, but he seemed to think that my fear of disappointing him has made me an honorary art major. Not that I’m complaining, the trip was amazing. I got to see The Banks of the Seheron IN PERSON.

I also got to see Solas in person! I don’t remember if I ever really talked to you about Solas. You must know of him since you falsified my application to his field work in the Emerald Graves last summer. He and I . . .clashed a lot at first. He has some pretty offensive opinions about Dalish culture. Or maybe it’s “had”? I don’t know if he changed them or if he’s just too scared to voice them. Not gonna lie, there were a couple times last summer that I really thought I’d get arrested for assault and battery.

But eventually he got tired of me yelling at him or maybe I actually made him rethink his ideas and we became friends by the end of it. I text him all the time, but I never expected to really see him again. Apparently, he works in Val Royeaux sometimes, cataloging and studying all the stuff he digs up, and once he knew I was there, he surprised me at the museum.

We had a good time, surprisingly. Not one argument the whole time, which is very unlike us. I showed him around my old neighborhood and gave him some new life experiences – greasy burgers and an old, outdated arcade. He’s never been to an arcade before, can you believe that? I mean, I had never been to an arcade before I met Alistair, but I grew up in the Dales. Solas doesn’t really have that excuse. It makes me wonder what kind of life he had growing up. He hasn’t said anything, but I get the distinct impression that he would sooner forget all about it. And, you know, Solas himself isn’t very forthcoming with any kind of personal details, especially about his past. He’s probably the most guarded person I’ve ever met and even though it infuriates me, it’s also fascinating.

We also went to the library where I met Abelas and you completely changed my life. It was surreal walking through there being the person I am now instead of who I used to be when I was clawing out a living there at the cost of my sanity.

I even found the exact copy of the book that I was reading when you were watching me. You know, the whole thought of that is still a little weird, but I can’t really argue with the results.

The coolest thing that happened was Solas sneaking me down into the basement of the museum where they keep all the art not currently on display and showing me a giant fresco of Fen’Harel. Like, THE Fen’harel. Kind of wish I had thought to take a picture of it, honestly, but I was in too much awe to even remember my own name.

But you should know what it looks like – it’s on the cover of the book that you bought me. Seeing it in real life was just . . .I can’t really describe, which I know sounds like a cop-out. It made everything about my history real in a way that I hadn’t felt before. You know, with the internet, it’s so easy to fake reality, but you couldn’t argue with this fresco. It was something from Arlathan that I
could touch (and I did, even though you’re not supposed to. Solas told me I could and he discovered it . . .so).

The shitty thing is that now I kind of realize that I would really love to go into archaeology. The fact that Solas was the one to dig that fresco out . . . that’s like my dream, my ultimate dream, right there. But I think it’s too late for me to get started, not to mention that field schools are horribly competitive and the work is really sporadic and heavily dependent on university funding, which is horribly unreliable. And I know for a fact I do not want an unstable, poverty stricken “career”.

Dr. Sten told me about volunteer programs for archaeologists, so I’ll definitely look into that. Maybe that will be enough. Or maybe I’ll save and save until I retire early and then I can go mess around in ruins as my middle age crisis.

Yours,

Ellana

---

To: e_lavellan@skyhold.edu
From: s_fellassan@skyhold.edu

Subject: Plans for this summer?

I am extending you the offer to join us again in the Emerald Graves this summer when your finals are over. This time, of course, of your own volition. I was able to score enough grant money to give you a small stipend so you can have more than the love of history to sustain you.

You are free to accept or deny, of course. I don’t know if you have already made plans with your friends. I want you to feel no pressure. But not only is your help invaluable to us, but we all miss your company. Bram wants you to witness his moment of triumph when he finally digs up a buckle. Merrill has also made plans for the Dalish holidays and Cole has made a misshapen tea cozy just for you.

And I have several books that I think you will find interesting.

Let me know of your decision and I will arrange the travel plans for you.

Your friend,

Solas

---

Ellana agonizes over that email for days. She had already spent hours combing through the summer course catalog and making up a schedule that would challenge her without killing her. But another summer back in the Dales, discovering history the way she always wanted to, teasing Solas and laughing with Bram and Merrill and Harding, knitting with Cole on the living room floor, proves extremely tempting. Not to mention the guilt at disappointing them. (Cole made her a tea cozy!)

But if she wants to soak up the last year of University and enjoy it to the fullest, she needs these summer classes.

Then again, she might never have this opportunity again. After she graduates she’ll have to get a job,
and who knows how long it would take her to earn enough vacation time to spend it on archaeology?

Time, however, forces her hand. Finals are approaching rapidly, spots are filling up for the summer, and Ellana doesn’t have the luxury of indecision.

To: s_fellassan@skyholdu.edu

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

re: subject: Plans for this summer?

Hey Solas! Thank you so much for the offer. It’s so thoughtful of you and I miss all of you guys so much. I had a great time last summer and I would love to come back. Unfortunately, there’s still so much I want to do and learn about here at Skyhold and only one year left to do it. If I don’t take some classes this summer, I won’t be able to fit it all in.

Trust me, this was a really hard decision to make, and I kind of hate myself for skipping out, but not as much as I would hate myself next semester with 24 hours worth of classes each week. But I would love to be considered for any other opportunities to work with you, even if it’s not paid, or even in Elven history.

I’m sorry, Solas. Thank you, again, for thinking about me.

Your friend,

Ellana

To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: s_fellassan@skyholdu.edu

re: re:subject: Plans for the summer?

Ellana, while your decision disappoints me, I understand it. You have a voracious appetite for knowledge. I would not want to keep you from getting your fill for the time that you have left. Cole insists on mailing you your tea cozy, so expect a soft package in the mail in the next week or so.

Your friend,

Solas

“Dorian, you are making a mistake.”

“Respectfully, Dr. Giselle, I need you to mind your own business.”

Ellana pauses at the end of the hallway, the sheet of paper with her summer courses folded in her hand. She takes a step back, by the bathrooms, but she can still hear every word of their argument.

“It has become my business, Dorian.”
“One letter from my father doesn’t make it your business! It just makes him desperate.”

“And you are being stubborn!”

“Dr. Giselle, I realize you are just doing what you think is right, but if you have any affection for me at all, you will let the matter drop.”

There follows an uncomfortable silence. Ellana almost turns around and heads back to the apartment.

“Very well,” says Dr. Giselle with a heavy sigh. “Forgive me if I have overstepped.”

The door to his office opens, and Ellana doesn’t have time to duck into the bathroom before Dr. Giselle sees her. They share a brief but uncomfortably intense gaze before Dr. Giselle continues on to the elevator.

Ellana counts to a hundred, slowly, and then walks as loudly as she can to the office, whistling, as if she has no idea what happened.

She knocks on the door, even though it’s open. Dorian is staring at his computer screen, hand covering his mouth, but the cursor doesn’t move.

“Hey, you got a minute?” she asks. “I have my summer courses picked out. I wanted you to look over them before I put them in.”

“Yes, of course,” he says briskly, standing up. “I just need to run to the gentleman's facilities. I’ll be back shortly.”

Immediately, Ellana knows she has fucked up, coming here so soon after that argument. She should have given him space, but she was worried, and also morbidly curious.

Dorian is gone for nearly ten minutes. Ellana rechecks the list and then rechecks it again, trying to find some feasible excuse to leave that wouldn’t make Dorian suspicious. She’s just about to text Josephine and ask her to call her with some bullshit urgent matter when Dorian strolls back into the room.

“Where were we?” he asks with a cheeriness that does not fool Ellana at all. He plucks the list, looking pathetically worn by now, from her hand and peruses it as he sits down. She keeps glancing out the door and into the hallway, where she desperately wants to be.

“Is that . . . is that going to be too much?” she asks, swallowing.

“It’s going to be a lot of work, but not more than you can handle.”

“Okay. Cool. Well, I better put these in before the spots get taken.”

“I can do it from here,” says Dorian, turning towards his computer.

“That’s okay!” Ellana almost shouts, and he raises an eyebrow. “I’ve . . . got stuff I got to do at the apartment anyway and I better get going.”

“Stuff?” he asks dryly. “What kind of stuff?”

“Yeah. I have to . . . clean the toilet.”

She swallows and wants to hurl herself off the roof. God this is the most awkward, horrifying exchange of conversation she has ever lived through.
“You heard every word, didn’t you?” he says, his gaze piercing.

She swallows again. “Yeah. I did. I’m sorry.”

His gaze relaxes just a little. “It’s alright. It’s not like I was trying to be quiet.”

“What . . . what happened? I mean, if you want to share it.”

Dorian stays quiet for a long moment, and Ellana thinks he might boot her out of his office.

“My father has been trying to contact me for at least two months. I haven’t spoken to him since I was 15, but my occupation here is public record. So, obviously, I throw away his correspondence and I don’t reply. I don’t even read them anymore. They all say the same thing.”

“Which is?”

“That he wants to meet with me. Talk to me.”

“And when he didn’t hear from you, he went to Dr. Giselle?”

“Yes. Apparently Alexius told him once that she had been a mentor for me. Conniving bastard.”

“Just tell him you don’t want to see him or talk to him,” says Ellana. “Then he’ll stop bugging you.”

“If I give him an inch, he will take a mile,” says Dorian. “I would never get any peace if he knew he could irritate me into answering him.”

“Oh. Well then . . . “ she shrugs, slowly bringing her hands up. “What can you do?”

“Exactly, my dear. Exactly. But it’s nothing you need to worry about,” he says, turning back to his computer. “Let’s get you signed up and on your way.”

When Ellana arrives at the elevators, Dr. Giselle appears at her side, almost like a ghost.

Or like someone who has been waiting.

“Good afternoon, Serah Lavellan,” she says.

“Hi, Dr. Giselle.”

If Ellana can get home, she really will clean the toilet, she swears to the Creators.

“May I have a quick word with you in my office?” Giselle asks, and Ellana groans inwardly.

“Sure,” she says because how can she say no? She owes this woman big time and Dr. Giselle knows it.

So they turn around and head down the stairs to Dr. Giselle’s office. Ellana dreads the entire short trip. She does not want to get caught in the middle of Dorian’s family drama, especially since he clearly doesn’t want anyone’s help. But Dr. Giselle is as stubborn as he is, so Ellana sits without protest while Giselle shuts the door.

“I know you must have heard the argument I had with Dr. Pavus,” she begins.

“Dr. Giselle, I don’t want to get involved in something that is none of my business,” Ellana says.
“I’m sorry.”

The woman looks at Ellana for a moment, sizing her up in a way that makes Ellana fight not to squirm in her seat.

“You and Dorian seem very close with each other,” she says, finally. “Much more so than is usual or, frankly, appropriate between staff and student.”

Something heavy settles in the pit of her stomach. Is this some kind of blackmail?

“I . . . I’m not in love with him,” she sputters. “He’s my . . . my mentor, my friend.”

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean that sort of implication,” says Dr. Giselle, looking slightly alarmed. “I only wanted to point out that you are close with him, you care for him. You wish for his happiness. Is this true?”

“. . . yes.”

“Dorian does not want to speak with his father. I’m sure he has a very valid reason not to do so. But his father seeks nothing more than a chance to apologize and make peace with his son. I believe if Dorian misses this opportunity, he will regret it for the rest of his life.”

“It might just take some more time for Dorian to get over whatever happened that made him run away,” says Ellana. “You can’t rush these things.”

“Normally, I would agree with you. But Dorian does not have time. His father is dying.”

For the second time that day, Ellana finds herself nearing Dorian’s office with intense trepidation. In fact, she feels a little like she might throw up. This can and probably will blow up horribly in her face. She really should be minding her own godsdamn business. But she knows what it’s like to not have all the facts and she hates it.

She knocks lightly. “Hey, Dorian.”

The door cracks open to reveal his puzzled face. “Darling, I know you can’t get enough of me, but you’ve been gone barely thirty minutes.”

“Can I ask you something?”

The door swings open immediately, and he steps to the side. “Is something wrong? You look constipated.”

“Thanks,’ she says dryly, stepping through the doorway. “Look, Giselle caught me when I was leaving.”

“Maker’s balls,” Dorian groans. “That woman does not give up. Please tell me you told her you’re a good little girl that minds her own business.”

“She tried to get me to trick you into seeing your dad,” she says.

“She what?” He stands up so suddenly that he nearly knocks over his coffee. His eyes look thunderous. “Has she lost her goddamn mind?”

He looks ready to bolt out the door and storm all the way downstairs to Dr. Giselle’s office, so Ellana
presses a hand against his chest.

“Relax! I wasn’t going to trick you. I came straight here. But... and I know this is none of my business and I’m sorry, but I think you should... go.”

He shoves her hand away from him and takes a step back, and the look of betrayal on his face is worse than if he had slapped her.

“Of course you think that,” he says quietly. “And of course Giselle would reduce herself to deception to get me to go along. You don’t know the truth of what happened, so it just seems like I’m being a heartless, stubborn bastard.”

“Well, what is the truth?” Ellana asks.

For a moment she’s afraid Dorian will just kick her out. And all she can do is wait a few days and grovel for forgiveness. He has every right to kick her out, to be angry at her, because she absolutely is not minding her own business. But instead, he sits in his desk chair and motions for her to shut the door.

“When I was 15, my father tried to betroth me to a girl I had never seen before. I threw a fit, and it turned into this huge row between him and me. He tried to accuse me of not caring about the family bloodline or reputation, which is true, by the way, so I took my desire for other boys and I threw it in his face. I told him that he would never get an heir because I would rather die than touch a woman.”

Ellana’s eyebrows go up at that.

“Yes, it was very dramatic, even for me. My father had no idea of my orientation. Most Tevinter fathers have to worry about their heirs liking women too much and sullying the bloodline with too many bastard children. But the fact that I didn’t plan on having any children, much less bastard children, stopped him cold. Truly, it’s a father’s worst nightmare.”

“What did he do?”

There’s another moment of silence. Dorian looks at something that seems miles away.

“There are places in Tevinter that people can send their children who have the affliction of same sex attraction,” he says, barely above a whisper. “They promise to cure these children of their delusions so they can grow up and become the dutiful heirs they were meant to be.”

Dread, like ice, settles in her stomach. She almost doesn’t want to hear the rest.

“I was there for one day, and already I had seen enough mental and physical torture to make me run, in the middle of the night, from the middle of the wilderness, all the way home. When my father learned of what happened at those places, he was horrified, of course. He had no idea how these people were supposed to change, only that they could, and that was enough for him. He promised he would never send me to such a place again. But within the next week he was already reserving life-long, private therapy for me.

“When I realized that he would not give up until he found some way to force me to conform, I packed up my bags, bought a plane ticket to Redcliffe, and ran to Alexius.”

He leans forward in his chair, his gaze almost burning. “My father would rather destroy me than accept me, and I will never forgive him for it. Not if he sends me a thousand letters, not if he’s begging on his knees, not if he’s --”
"Dying?" Ellana asks and he freezes. "Dr. Giselle’s letter says that he has terminal pancreatic cancer. He’s got six months, if he’s lucky."

"That’s not-" Dorian leans back, his face almost slack. Shock has blown his anger out like a candle flame. "That’s a ploy to get me to- to talk to him."

"It might be. I guess in six months we’ll find out."

Dorian stares at her, at a loss for words. Ellana uses that moment to press on.

"You have every right to feel whatever you want to feel about your father. You can love your father, you can hate him. You can forgive him, you can carry that grudge until you die. It doesn’t matter to me. But in six months you will never again get to say anything to him, good or bad. If you don’t want to take this opportunity to talk to him, fine. But I just thought you should know that you’re never going to get another one."

She stands up. "You deserve to have all the facts, and now that you do, I’ll butt out. I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to get involved. Just . . . let me know if you need anything."

He nods, slowly, like he’s in a dream, like his mind is a thousand miles away, and Ellana sees herself out.

She knows that something is wrong when Dorian stands on her doorstep at 7:15 in the morning. Without coffee. He’s impeccably dressed, more so than usual, in slacks, a deep green silk shirt underneath a trim blazer. But the look in his eyes is anything but composed, rimmed with dark circles.

She wants to crack a joke, maybe something about a spur of the moment wedding with Iron Bull, but that gaze stops her.

"What’s wrong? What’s happened?" she asks, opening the door wider.

"I need a favor," he asks, stepping in. "I know you don’t really want to be dragged into this whole affair, but I’m to meet my father at nine, and I don’t want to go alone."

"Why me?" she asks. "Why not Iron Bull? Wouldn’t your boyfriend be better emotional support?"

"Yes, let me take my Qunari boyfriend to meet my very conservative Tevine father. Brilliant idea, Ellana. Maybe I’ll get lucky and a heart attack will finish him off before the cancer."

"Well, I’m Dalish, you think that’s any better?"

"Look, you don’t really have to talk to him." Dorian paces in front of the couch, a hand reaching up to dig itself into his hair before he catches himself and clenches it. "I just need someone to keep me from running when I see him . . . and to step in if he has hired men to kidnap me back to Tevinter," he adds, deadly serious.

"You think he would do that?"

"He’s dying, and I’m the only son and heir to his position. I’d put nothing past that man."

Ellana sighs. "I mean, I still say that Iron Bull would be a lot better for this position, but if you want me to come, I’ll do it."
Dorian almost sags in relief and collapses onto the couch.

“Thank the Maker, Ellana, I truly owe you.”

She sits down next to him. “I think I’m the one that owes you, to be honest. What time do you want to leave?”

“Soon.” But he makes no motion to leave, and she can see the fatigue weighing on him.

They sit there for a few minutes before Josephine returns from her morning jog, sweaty and glowing, her hair thrown up in a messy bun. Most people look like trolls after running three miles, but not Josephine. If she wasn’t so kind, Ellana would almost hate her.

“Dorian!” she says, her eyebrows raising. “You’re looking impeccable for such an early hour.”

“My God, don’t tell me you were out there running at this hour of the morning,” he says.

“Of course,” she says. “It’s the coolest part of the day. And it’s beautiful outside. You should try it sometime.”

“I would rather die,” he tells her seriously.

Josephine smiles. “What’s the occasion?” she asks, gesturing at his outfit.

“He’s . . . visiting family,” Ellana says delicately.

“Ah.”

She doesn’t need to say much more. Josephine takes one look at Dorian’s haggard, exhausted face – gods only know if he slept at all the night before – and draws the right conclusion.

“Do you have time for coffee?” she asks, heading into the kitchen.

“If you brew me a cup of coffee, I will build you a statue,” Dorian says fervently.

They emerge with matching to-go cups, Dorian’s under-eye circles hiding under Josephine’s concealer.

His father is meeting him in the small park by the coffee shop. The entire trip downtown is silent. Dorian’s fingers tap incessantly on the steering wheel until Ellana places a hand over his to stop it, and he looks down at himself in surprise. Dorian parks under a tree and immediately throws his seatbelt off and climbs out of the car, as if afraid to give himself time to second-guess.

His motivation lasts until they find his father sitting quietly on a bench, a book in his lap, and Dorian stops dead in his tracks. Every so often the man looks up and surveys his surroundings, anxiously looking for Dorian. Dressed in dark brown trousers and a cream button-down, a cane resting against the seat, he looks so unassuming that Ellana almost thinks it’s a mistake.

“Do you know what you’re going to say to him?” she asks quietly, though they are far out of earshot from the man.

“No.” The color has drained from his face and he has yet to move. “There’s both so much and yet so little. I can’t quite decide which one he deserves.”

“I guess you’ll just have to wing it.”
He shakes his head, his eyes never leaving the man on the bench. “This is a colossally stupid idea,” he mutters. “There’s nothing I can gain from this, Ellana. I should have never come.”

He tries to turn around, but Ellana grabs his shirt sleeve, crumpling the fabric in a way that makes him gasp, and propels him forward. “Oh, no you don’t. You dragged both of us all the way the hell out here on a weekend, and it’s not going to be for nothing.”

“You were already awake,” he protests, but falls silent as they approach his father.

Ellana has to admit, despite the atrocities of parenting she’s heard this man commit, the fragile hope and joy that light his face at the sight of Dorian almost breaks her heart.

“Dorian,” he breathes, standing up (with a little difficulty, Ellana notices). His eyes dart briefly to Ellana, but return, fully focused on his son.

Dorian keeps his distance, arms crossed. “What is this, exactly, Father? Ambush? Kidnapping? Warm family reunion?”

His father sighs deeply. “Kidnapping, Dorian, really? Even for you, that’s dramatic.”

“Oh, really? And what do you call spiriting me away in the middle of the night to that goddamn torture prison you sent me to?”

His father flinches as if Dorian had slapped him.

“I thought I was doing what was best for you,” he says, almost pleading.

Dorian jabs his finger at his father. “No, you were only doing what was best for you. For your fucking legacy. Anything for that! The camp didn’t work out so you looked for other solutions. You never once thought to just let me live as I am!”

His voice rises until he’s almost yelling. The people around them give them troubled looks, but only Ellana seems to notice.

“Dorian, I do not want to relive the past,” his father says quietly. “If you would only listen to me.”

“Why? So you can spout more convenient lies? No, thank you. Ellana, we’re going.”

“No! Dorian-”

His father reaches out, but Dorian has already spun around and is walking thunderously down the path to the exit. For one brief, intense moment, she locks eyes with Dorian’s father, and the despair in his gaze makes her breath catch.

She breaks away and runs to catch up with Dorian, but that look haunts her. They get all the way to his car without saying a word, but Dorian hesitates at the door, keys dangling in his hands.

“You feel better, getting that off your chest?” she asks, studying him.

His face is shuttered closed, a carefully blank mask, trying to lock away his feelings so they can’t affect him.

“No,” he says.

“You’re never going to see him again, Dorian. Is that how you want to it end?”
The mask slips enough for her to see the war going on inside of him. She watches him, waiting to see which side wins. Eventually he sighs, and tosses her the keys.

“No. No, it’s not. I’ll . . . text you when we’re done. Hopefully I’m not too late.”

He takes off back towards the park, and Ellana is grateful enough to send a little prayer to the Creators.

Dorian is gone for a long time, which she takes as a good sign. She kills time perusing the shops, spending entirely too long on finding a graduation card for Josephine. (It’s hard to find a card that can express both the pride for her achievement and the despair of losing her to some prissy school in Val Royeaux.)

Two hours pass before Dorian texts her, and they meet back up at the coffee shop. He looks much better in spirit, though his sleepless night is starting to catch up with him, judging by how many espresso shots he has asked for.

“Well,” she starts, “How did it go?”

“It . . . it went well, surprisingly,” says Dorian. “It was good that I went back. Thank you, Ellana. You were the push I needed.”

“You’re welcome,” she says. “Though I still think Iron Bull would have been better, if only for the reaction.”

Dorian gives her a half smile. “The thing is, the Qunari don’t really have families the way that we do. I have no doubt he would have supported whatever decision I wanted to make, but he wouldn’t have understood the strange, fucked up way I love and hate my father. He wouldn’t have pushed me to reconsider, the way you did.”

“What do Qunari have instead of families?” Ellana asks.

Dorian pulls a face. “Some strange breeding program. I don’t ask questions. Not sure I really want to know.”

“Huh.”

She turns her gaze back to the street, watching the people heading down the sidewalk, enjoying the late spring breeze that ruffles their hair.

“Ellana, what happened to your parents?”

She jumps and looks up at him, the question hitting her like an arrow, straight to her gut.

“What?” she asks dumbly, even though she heard him perfectly fine.

“You don’t have to answer,” he says hastily. “I just wondered. You seem to have a perspective on my situation that others do not.”

“They . . . “

She considers not telling him. Even after all these years, her parents are a memory best left locked up. But Dorian has been deeply vulnerable with her these last few days and she feels like he deserves the answer more than most.
“They died when I was seven,” she says. “In a car accident. It was a bad thunderstorm. They swerved to avoid hitting a halla and ran over the edge of a cliff.”

“Dear Maker,” Dorian says softly. “You were so young. I can’t even imagine.”

Ellana fidgets with the sugar packets at their table, rearranging them by color. She has never been comfortable with other people’s sympathy, even if it came from the right place.

“I try not to remember what it was like before. It’s . . . too much. But I would give anything to see them again. To talk to them.” She swallows thickly. “I’m glad that . . . you took that chance.”

“Me too. Not many kids who get rejected for their identity get second chances like this with their parents.”

“Yeah, Krem’s parents definitely aren’t going to be calling him up any time soon begging for forgiveness.”

“Bastards,” Dorian says softly. He heaves a deep sigh. “It’s so temporary, though. I’m wondering if I’m just setting myself up for more pain.”

Ellana reaches out and squeezes his wrist. “When he’s gone, you’re going to be grateful that you did.”

“We shall see, I guess.”

A week before finals, Ellana comes home from the library to find the living room in shambles. The furniture sits in crooked angles in the middle of the room, the knickknacks are spread out on the floor. At first she thinks they might have gotten robbed, until she spots the vacuum, duster, and cleaning wipes scattered everywhere. Josephine stands on a ladder in the middle of the chaos, polishing the brass on the ceiling fan, her hair wrapped in a bandanna, like a maid, if that maid also happened to be a princess in disguise.

“Josephine . . . what the hell is happening here?”

Josephine startles, scrambling for a grip on the ladder, before glaring down at Ellana.

“What is happening, Ellana? My parents. My parents are happening! They are going to be here in less than a week, and this place is hideous!”

Ellana looks around again. “Well, it is now .”

“I’m rearranging the furniture.”

“What was wrong with it before?”

Josephine scrubs at a particularly stubborn sport. “It was -- I mean, it’s -- it was just -- not right.”

“Not right?” Ellana says flatly, folding her arms.

Josephine stops scrubbing and looks down at her. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you.”

“Yes.” Ellana doesn’t even hesitate.

“My parents are going to visit here, and I don’t want them to see this place looking like -- like --”
“Like people live here?” Ellana finishes, somewhat sardonically.

“Oh, come on, Ellana. If your Keeper were to come visit, wouldn’t you want this place to look nice?”

“Well, yeah, but my Keeper isn’t going to inspect the ceiling fan! What are your parents expecting, the palace at Halamshiral?”

Josephine sighs. “You obviously haven’t seen my house. Gold filigree on the ceiling, heirloom furniture over three hundred years old, tapestries on the wall.”

“It sounds disgusting.”

“It is obscene,” she agrees. “But that’s how I grew up. My parents paid for this apartment and everything in it, and I don’t want to them to come here and think I wasted it living like a stereotypical college kid with moldy food in the fridge and dirty clothes on the floor.”

“Josie, you obsessively clean that fridge out every Sunday. Your parents are here to see you graduate, not inspect your living conditions. Not that it matters since you’re moving out in a month or so anyway.”

Josephine flinches at that, and Ellana tries not to think about the letters from the University of Val Royeaux that have been appearing on the dining room table. Josephine hasn’t made her official announcement yet, but Ellana knows it’s coming.

“But whatever you need help with, I’ll do it, if that will keep you from stressing out,” she finishes, changing the subject before Josephine can say anything about the impending end of their time together.

“Thanks, Ellana,” she says with a smile tinged with sadness. “Help me put the furniture back?”

By the end of the week, the toilet has been bleached and scrubbed, every speck of dust wiped away, the carpets shampooed and steam cleaned, the walls wiped clean. It looks brand new, and Ellana is afraid to breathe in it, mainly because she doesn’t want to have to clean up afterward. Again.

As graduation nears, Josephine becomes more and more of a nervous wreck. On top of juggling finals, she has to juggle graduation practice, planning out her family’s visit, and getting her room and board in order at the University of Orlais.

Though she made her decision on her graduate school weeks ago, she refuses to announce her choice to the rest of her friends at her graduation party. Only Ellana and Krem seem to know and that’s only through hints and some light detective work. Ellana’s not a mind reader, but she has the feeling that Josephine wants to put off the announcement for as long as possible, because, well, it’s shitty news to everyone but her.

Ellana also tries to not think about it too much. Josephine’s been entangled in her life since her first semester, and the thought of life here without her is incomprehensible.

She would be worried about Krem, too, if he didn’t seem so unearthly calm about the whole thing.

“How are you this chill?” she demands.

It’s two days before graduation, and Krem is lifting weights rather than seeing his girlfriend.
Krem takes a moment to answer, heaving the barbell with shaking arms. He’s up to benching nearly two hundred pounds now.

“Chill about what?” he asks, gasping.

“Josephine’s graduation! Your girlfriend’s ditching you to live five hours away. Aren’t you going to miss her? Why am I more depressed than you are?”

“I mean . . . you live with her. You’re getting . . . more of a change . . . than me.” Krem pushes up one more time before placing the barbell back onto its stand.

“But you are her boyfriend. Aren’t you even nervous about meeting her parents?”

He sits up slowly, grabbing the towel on the floor beside the bench and wipes his face. “A little. I met them over video chat a couple of times. They seem like nice people. And of course I’ll miss Josie. I’ll miss her like hell, but it’s only a year before I graduate, too, and then I can move out there with her. If we can’t handle one year apart, then we’re never going to make it. Besides,” he adds, reaching for his water bottle, “we’ve only been going out less than a year. I’m not expecting her to rearrange her future for me.”

He gives her a pointed look. “Honestly, it’s you I’m worried about. Have you figured out where you’re going to live?”

“Fen’Harel said he could take over the lease from Josephine. I just have to give him the date that she’s moving out.”

An idea suddenly occurs to her, and she can’t believe she didn’t think of it sooner.

“You should move into her old bedroom,” she says. “We could be roommates again!”

He grins at her. “I was wondering when you were going to ask.”

Before he was rightly redistributed to the boys’ dorm, Ellana had loved living with Krem. He might not be as obsessively cleanly or decorative as Josephine, but Ellana can steal his clothes just as easily. It puts a slightly bright spot in an otherwise dim future.

The first thing Ellana notices about Josephine’s parents is how devastatingly beautiful they both are. Even in the dim lighting of the restaurant, they glow. She should have expected it – Josephine looks like a princess from a fairy tale and she had to get it from somebody.

Josephine catches sight of her and waves her over to their table. Her family erupts into wide grins full of sparkling white teeth at the sight of her.

Mrs. Montilyet leans across the table to kiss Ellana’s cheek, sending a waft of floral perfume, and Mr. Montilyet kisses her hand almost exactly the way Zevran does. Josephine’s younger sister even hugs her.

They might all look like movie stars, but Ellana feels like the celebrity.

“Oh, Ellana, it’s so wonderful to finally meet you,” says Josephine’s mother. “We’ve heard so, so much about you. We were devastated when you couldn’t meet us last summer.”

“I heard you were at an archaeological dig,” says Mr. Montilyiet. “That’s fascinating, I’d love to
“Hear more about it.”

“How about we let her sit down and order first,” says Josephine with a tinge of exasperation.

“Yes, of course. My apologies.” Mr. Montilyet stands up and graciously pulls out a seat for Ellana beside Krem.

“Thank you,” she says, surprised, though she shouldn’t be. Josephine has always had impeccable manners.

“Order anything you want,” says Mrs. Montilyet. “It’s our treat.”

Ellana scans down the menu, and thank gods she practiced with Solas because the prices here for seafood are outrageous. She has a brief moment of panic – she’s caught and eaten plenty of fish, but never seafood – when Krem very discreetly places his finger next to the fresh fish section of the menu.

She sends him a wordless look of thanks and places her order.

When Josephine told her that she was invited to dinner with her parents, Ellana almost didn’t go. They were here to see their daughter, and Ellana would feel like she would be encroaching on that time, an unwelcome tag-along despite Josephine’s instance to the contrary.

But Ellana shouldn’t have worried. According to Josephine’s parents, she’s practically family. Definitely close enough to warrant the parade of embarrassing childhood stories, which she and Krem listen to with glee.

“So, what do you think about Josie’s doll collection?” Yvette asks with mock casualty.

Krem and Ellana exchange looks.

“Her what now?” Ellana asks.

“Yvette, don’t you dare,” Josephine hisses.

Yvette ignores her sister and looks at Ellana and Krem with wide eyes. “You mean she hasn’t showed you her doll collection? I thought you guys were friends!”

“Yeah, Josie, I thought we were friends,” Ellana says, turning her gaze towards Josephine.

Even in this dim lighting, Josephine’s blush practically glows.

“It’s nothing,” she insists. “They’re packed away. I keep them for sentimental reasons.”

“You don’t still play with them?” Yvette still maintains her wide eyed innocence. “You did that all the time back home.”

“Oh, really?” says Krem, nudging Josephine with his shoulder. “I feel a little hurt, Ellana. Don’t you? She’s never once invited us to play with her.”


When her parents are distracted by calling over the waiter for more drinks, Josephine leans over the table and hisses, “Enjoy tonight because later I am going to kill you.”
Yvette just blinks. “For what? Shouldn’t Krem know what he’s getting into when he marries you?”

Josephine gasps, and Krem chokes on his drink so hard that Ellana has to pat him on the back.

“It is not like that,” Josephine hisses, eyes darting over to her parents.

“What’s not like what?” Josephine’s mother asks.

“Nothing!”

Josephine sends her sister a glare so poisonous, so deeply anti-Josephine, that it looks like she’s been possessed by an evil spirit. But Yvette turns back to her food completely unfazed, happy with the damage she’s caused.

Ellana is definitely going to ask about the dolls later.

They eat until late – much later than Ellana expected. Apparently Antivans eat late as a custom. The night had passed quickly, the conversation hopping around as easily as if she had known these people for years. Finally, around eleven thirty, Josephine notices Ellana starting to nod off.

“Tired already?” Mrs. Montiliyet teases. “We’ve only just gotten started.”

“Sorry, Mama, Ellana is an early riser,” Josephine says, nudging Ellana awake with her shoulder. “Krem, make sure she gets home alright?”

He yawns. “Yeah, sure.”

“It was wonderful to meet you,” says Mr. Montiliyet, getting up to shake Ellana’s hand.

“Same. I can see where Josephine gets all of her charm from,” says Ellana.

Yvette and her mother both give Ellana long hugs goodbye even though she will see them at the ceremony, if not before.

She packs up the leftovers and heads over to the student tram. This time of night it’s almost empty, so they make a beeline for the coveted bench seats in the back.

Downtown passes by them in a series of softly glowing streetlamps.

Ellana thinks back on the night, head leaning against the window.

“Sometimes do you ever, like, want to hate Josephine?” she asks softly.

Krem turns his head towards her. “What do you mean?”

“She’s gorgeous. She’s intelligent. She comes from an incredibly wealthy family who loves her more than anything. She makes friends everywhere she goes. She’s got a great boyfriend who adores her. Like, what is she missing? Nothing. I thought life was supposed to be a trade-off, you know? A balance of good and shitty things but . . . that doesn’t seem to apply to her.”

Ellana exhales, hating the squirming grubby feeling in her chest.

“Of course I love her. She does so much for people. She’s done so much for me. But does it ever piss you off how unfair it is that she gets to have it all?”

Krem is silent for a moment, and Ellana thinks that maybe this should have been a conversation from
before he started dating Josephine.

“Yeah, sometimes,” he says quietly. “Days when my binder hurts, when I’m trying budget out my scholarship money, when it’s my birthday and my parents refuse to acknowledge my existence. But, you know, sometimes that kind of balance comes later in life. Who knows what things will be like for her when her parents die and she becomes head of the family? She’s got a lot of responsibility looming on the horizon, so I want her to enjoy this time while she has it.”

“That’s true.”

Krem pats her leg. “And hey, if we’ve put up with so much shit so young, that can only mean good things on our horizon, yeah? We’ve got a lot to look forward to.”

She smiles at him and bumps his shoulder.

Ellana 10:57

as a professor, how many graduation ceremonies have you attended?

Solas 10:59

Too many

Ellana 11:00

then wtf solas

y didn’t you warn me?!

Solas 11:00

Warn you of what?

Ellana 11:01

how utterly fucking LONG and BORING they are

it’s been an hour and they still haven’t called out any names

Solas 11:03

Forgive me, I thought you knew the nature of ceremonies
Ellana 11:04

are u kidding me?

Dalish ceremonies are short and to the point so we can hurry up and party
no one has time for bullshit speeches

Solas 11:05

Then I apologize, but you are in for a very long and tedious ride

Ellana 11:25

how many fucking speeches can one ceremony have

Solas 11:26

You would be surprised.

You have my deepest sympathies, Ellana.

Ellana: 11:33

pls tell me ill be over soon

or I might throw myself off the roof

Dorian 11:34

My sweet summer child.

Is this your first graduation ceremony?

Ellana 11:35

ur not answering my question!

Varric 11:35
take a nap, babe

if you get out of this alive drinks are on me

Ellana 11:36

I am holding you to that

its the only thing that will keep me going

Ellana does not take a nap, but she does play *I Spy* with Zevran, Krem, and Cassandra until Josephine’s name is called, and then they all stand up and yell, Cassandra blowing a wolf whistle loud enough to shatter eardrums.

Then they return to their game until – fucking *finally* – the ceremony ends and the graduating students throw their hats in the air.

Ellana 1:36

*im totally skipping my graduation next year*

Solas 1:37

*Oh?*

Ellana 1:37

*theres no way im going through this again*

*fuck that*

Solas 1:38

*I’ve attended nearly 10 graduation ceremonies*

Weak

Of course, there’s a party at the Hanged Man. A custom banner hangs across the ceiling that reads ‘*Congrats Ruffles!*’. A modest pile of wrapped gifts and cards sits atop one of the tables in the corner. The bar is open, drinks are flowing, and the only patrons are those invited by Josephine herself.
“Does the owner of this place ever get pissed at how often you shut this place down for a party?” Ellana asks Varric.

He’s playing bartender tonight, standing on a stool behind the counter, and he pulls out an apple ale from the mini fridge for her.

“No,” he says wryly, “because the owner is me.”

“What? When?”

Varric chuckles. “Within the first year I moved here. It reminded me of this hole in the wall that Hawke and I used to hang out in. I practically lived there in college. Technically this is the second Hanged Man – I named it after that first bar.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” she says. “You’ve always acted like you own the place. Do you ever lose money, all those times you’ve given us drinks for free?”

He shrugs. “I like to think of it as extra rent. Just . . . don’t tell anyone else. If everyone knows, they’ll never stop bitching about having to pay for anything, and then this place really will go under.”

Ellana winks and shakes her ale. “Just toss me one of these every blue moon and I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“Blackmail and bribery! I’ve taught you well.” His eyes travel over her shoulder, and she looks behind her to see Josephine’s parents talking to Dorian and his father at one of the tables. “They’re fitting in better than expected.”

“Yeah,” she says. “I was a little worried, to be honest. But they haven’t batted an eyelash at anyone so far, not even Iron Bull. Josephine lucked out on the parents department.”

“Don’t I know it,” he mutters, yanking the cork out of a bottle of rum and pouring himself a shot. “She better enjoy it while it lasts, ‘cause she’s got a hell of a burden on her shoulders when they’re gone. It’s not easy running a family empire. It’s why I let my brother do it while I ran for the hills.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” she says carefully. Varric shares so freely the shallow surface details of himself to trick others into forgetting they know nothing personal about him. He reminds her of Solas in that aspect.

Varric downs his shot without so much as a flinch or gasp. “Bartrand. He’s older than me, but there was a time in college when he was . . . out of commission for a while. I had to take the reins. And let me tell you, it sucked ass. I do not recommend.”

She knows better than to push for more, so she just nods and leaves it at that. To be fair, no one but Dorian knows any details about her parents and that happened not even a month ago. She’s just as skilled at keeping those kinds of secrets as Varric.

Varric shoos her with his hand. “Run along. Go mingle. Our Josie’s leaving. You better soak up as much of her as you can.”

She actually came to the bar to hide from that fact, and, consequently, Josephine. As her departure date – one month from now – looms closer on the horizon, Ellana feels torn between two urges. One would be to follow Varric’s advice and spend as much time with her friend as possible. But the other is to distance herself, practice how Josephine’s absence feels ahead of time, so it doesn’t hurt so much when she leaves. The first is obviously smarter, but the second is more tempting.
Besides, she isn’t the only person to care about Josephine by far, and it feels selfish and a little presumptuous to think that she has more of a demand to Josephine’s time than Zevran or Cassandra or, hell, Josephine’s own boyfriend.

So Ellana clears off the bar, but she joins Zev, Cassandra, and Iron Bull at the pool table.

“There room for one more?” she asks.

“Oh, yeah,” says Iron Bull. “We can play doubles, so long as the two of you --” he jabs his cue stick at her and Cassandra “-- don’t team up. I’m not falling for that shit again.”

Halfway through the third game, Krem slinks into the backroom, glancing over his shoulder.

“If anyone asks, you never saw me,” he says.

“Hiding from the in-laws?” Bull asks. His eyes narrow. “They didn’t say anything to you, did they?”

Krem shakes his head. “They love me. That’s the problem!” He looks behind once more before edging closer to the pool table. “They tell me I’m going to love living in Antiva, and Antivan is so easy to learn, and all this other shit like me and Josephine getting married is a foregone conclusion!”

“It’s not?” Bull asks with mock innocence.

“Of course it’s not! It’s not even been a year! I don’t know what to say, though, because if I deny, it’ll seem like Josephine’s not good enough for me, and if I play along, I’m terrified at what I’m going to get sucked into!”

“So you’re hiding in here?” Ellana asks wryly.

“Yes.” He turns to Zevran. “If you give me your spot in the game, I will literally pay you to distract her parents.”

A sly grin spreads across Zevran’s face. “To caress the hand of so beautiful a mother, I would do it for free. But you are dancing with me next time we go out.”

“Anything,” says Krem. “I’ll salsa till my legs give out.”

Zevran throws him a filthy look. “I’ll hold you to that, mi amor.”

No one comments on the faint blush on Krem’s cheeks because they have all been there at one point or another.

“You made a deal with Maferath,” warns Cassandra.

“It’s worth it.”

About ten minutes until midnight, Varric pokes his head into the backroom.

“Any of you all seen the lady of the hour?” he asks.

“Josephine’s missing?” Krem asks.
“I’m not going into the bathroom to look for her.” Varric gives Ellana a pointed look. “But she’s due to speak in a few minutes and no one’s seen her for a while.”

She sighs and hands Krem her cue stick. “I’ll go get her.”

The bathrooms are empty. Ellana ducks her head to peer under the stalls just in case. She then sneaks out into the back alley from the door behind the bar, but she sees no sign of Josephine there either.

Did she go home? Is she sick?

“Up here,” comes a whisper.

Ellana looks over at the small stairs that head up to the small balcony that overlooks the rest of the bar. Varric keeps it for private card games, but right now it’s dark. She can just see the silhouette of Josephine leaning against the balcony railing.

The stairs creak underneath her footsteps, but everyone else is too preoccupied to notice. Still, she doesn’t pull out the flashlight on her phone and pays for it by knocking her shin into a stray chair.

“Are you alright?” Josephine smothers a giggle.

“Yeah,” Ellana says tersely. She joins Josephine on the balcony and smiles at the sight of Zevran charming the shit out of the Montilyets. Yvette looks particularly entranced.

“I’m never going to hear the end of that,” Josephine whispers, gesturing at her sister. “She’ll be lovestruck for months if he keeps this up.”

“I think we’ve all had a turn. It’s only fair she suffers, too,” says Ellana. “Are you hiding, too?”


Ellana has dreaded Josephine’s speech and subsequent announcement of her grad school plans all night. Now she wonders if she’s not the only one.

“You’re going to miss it?” Ellana asks.

Josephine doesn’t answer for a moment. “You know, I’ve received so much advice from my cousins and parents and professors since I started college and now, since I’m starting grad school. But no one has ever warned me about the tragedy of not realizing and savoring the moments that you look back on and miss when you’re older while you’re in them. They’ve always told me to look ahead, not get distracted from my future. All the best parts of my life are supposed to be ahead of me, but . . .”

She gestures out at the bar below them, at Varric and Cassandra exchanging retorts over the pool table, at Sera shooting spitwads through a straw, at Zevran talking animatedly in Antivan to the Montilyets, at Iron Bull sneaking a chug of whiskey straight from a bottle he swiped off the top shelf.

“One of the best parts has already been happening and I didn’t see until it was over,” she finishes.

“You’ll have friends no matter where you go,” says Ellana. “And we’ll always be here for you.”

“I know.” She squeezes Ellana’s hand. “I know. Come, I have a speech to make.”

The crowd cheers when they materialize beside the bar.
“Speech! Speech! Speech!” Sera yells, banging her beer bottle on the table.

“You’ve kept us in the dark long enough,” says Cassandra.

Iron Bull helps Josephine climb up onto the bar. She clutches an envelope in her hand and clears her throat. Everyone fall immediately silent.

“This is quite the fanfare for something as silly as grad school,” she says. “Thank you, everyone, for the lovely gifts and cards, but more importantly for your support and friendship.”

Her speech sounds so close to the trivial bullshit Ellana has heard all day at the ceremony that she has to roll her eyes. Josephine probably wrote this speech weeks ago, treating it like practice, which is such a stupid Josephine thing to do that Ellana’s throat feels suddenly tight.

“I was terrified to move here,” she continues. “I had never lived away from home, I had never been alone, and I was so afraid that I wasn’t strong enough to make it. I owe my success to all of you, to the love you’ve given me, to the ridiculous adventures you’ve dragged me into, to the sense of family I didn’t think I would ever have here. You’ve given me the courage to know that I could move somewhere else, alone and with nothing, all over again, and flourish.”

Godsdamn it. Ellana bites the side of her cheek to keep her eyes from welling up, but it’s a hard won victory. Josephine delicately wipes her cheek and chuckles a little at herself.

“I know you’re all dying to know what’s in this envelope,” she says, smiling. “I’ve kept it to myself this long because I wanted more time in this beautiful, happy bubble that is my life here without the threat of its loss hanging over everyone’s head. But we’ve waited long enough, so I’m proud to announce that I’m continuing my education at --”

She stops abruptly, the letter halfway tugged out of the envelope, and looks up at them for a long moment.

“-- at – at Skyhold,” she finishes. She stuffs the letter back into the envelope and smiles.

Ellana is incredibly suspicious, but the rest of their friends go nuts, hollering and slapping her on the back and hugging her.

“That is so fucked up!” Sera yells. “Making us think you were leaving when you’re not.”

Josephine grins. “You’re not the only one who can prank people, Sera.”

They party lasts for another hour before people start breaking up and heading home. Ellana waits, helping Josephine pack up the gifts into the car, watching her kiss her parents goodbye, not watching her kiss Krem goodbye at the front of his dorm.

She waits until they are finally alone in the dim quiet of their apartment. An apartment that Ellana is not going to lose after all.

“What did the letter really say?” Ellana asks.

Josephine drops the gift bags onto the kitchen counter.

“You should know. You’ve been watching my mail for weeks,” she says.

“The University of Orlais.”

Josephine nods.
“So, what happened?”

Josephine sighs and leans against the counter. “I just – I was looking out at everyone, and I just knew I wasn’t ready to leave yet. There’s only really a year left of it anyway, and then you and Krem and Cassandra, possibly Sera and Zevran, will all graduate and split off just like I was planning to. Why would I cut out early when I could be enjoying one last year with you all?”

“So you didn’t plan it?” Ellana asks.

“No! Not at all. But don’t tell Sera. It’s hard to impress her.”

“Won’t this mess everything up?”

“Skyhold was the first place I applied to, just in case I couldn’t get into my other schools,” says Josephine. “I can always transfer after you guys leave. And if not, the master’s program is only two years. It’s not a hardship for me to stay here an additional year and then get my doctorate at University of Val Royeaux.”

Ellana walks over and pulls Josephine into a tight hug. “I’m so glad you’re staying. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Josephine grips her tighter. “You’ve got another year to figure it out.”

When they pull away, Ellana smirks at her. “So, does this mean we’re close enough friends for me to see your doll collection?”

“You will be dead of old age before you see my dolls,” says Josephine.

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subject: I’m not homeless!

I don’t know if you’ve already started talking to the school about housing, but Josephine decided to stay at least one more year! So now I don’t have to worry about where I live!

I’m so incredibly relieved. I know that makes me sound kind of horrible because it involves Josephine putting her life on hold for me, even if she doesn’t quite see it that way, but I can’t help it. I like my status quo here. I like what I have. I want to savor it for my last year without any of the pieces missing.

Yet again I’m going to spend another Summer Break working my ass off. At least this time will be in the air conditioning. Solas invited me up for another summer at the Emerald Graves and I admit, I was tempted. It was a lot of fun once I adjusted and I miss him a lot. And Bram. And Merrill. And Cole. And definitely Harding.

But I want to also buckle down and take care of some of my classes so I can graduate on time with all the classes I wanted to take without killing myself over the last two semesters. You’ll be very proud at how studious I’m being.

Yours,

Ellana
Holy hot hell, I knew that the beginning of the school year would kick my ass but I didn't think it would be a four-month-long burnout.

Thank you to everyone who sticks with me and supports me. Love ya'll!

Sometimes Ellana wonders if she’ll ever get a real break. The first summer in Skyhold she got her heart broken. The second summer she worked her ass off in the sweaty, bug-infested woods.

This summer she’s drowning in homework.

Math has become easier over time, but even Ellana struggles with the workload of a three-hour class twice a week. Zevran still tutors her, mostly in the upper balcony of the Hanged Man now that the tutoring center is operating on limited summer hours.

She usually meets him around four, when the bar has just opened and only a few patrons are trickling in. They get unlimited soda from the taps, and Ellana will spring for the occasional basket of fries, and sometimes, when she’s getting a headache, Zevran will drag her out for dancing.

Any offer of payment earns her a dismissive wave and a claim that gazing upon her rugged beauty is enough.

Whatever. Ellana will take it.

This particular study session has her distracted by Zevran’s dangerous game of seeing how far he can tip his chair back and still keep his balance. Every so often the chair comes slamming back down to the ground, and Ellana jolts every time.

“Keep that up and I’ll tip you over myself,” she warns.

“I would like to see you try.”

Ellana does not respond to the bait, turning her focus back to her coding and resolving to kick his chair when he least expects it.

But just a few minutes later a resounding crash startles her from her textbook. Zevran is sprawled out on the floor.

“I swear it wasn’t me,” Ellana says, but Zevran stares out into the bar below, looking like he just saw a ghost.

Ellana casts her gaze downward just in time to see a hooded man duck outside.

“Zev, are you alright?”

“Yes . . .” he says. He gives her a brilliant smile. “I tempted the gods, and I got my just rewards.”
He gets to his feet, setting the chair gently back on four legs.

“Where were we, mi amor?”

Solas 4:45

I keep forgetting to ask and just thought of it today

Did you and your friends ever have part 2 of the murder game?

Ellana 4:56

sera started a sort of version of it last week?

Solas 4:58

Oh?

Ellana 4:58

yeah

its called

“scare the shit out of someone until they have a heart attack”

Solas 5:00

How charming

Ellana 5:00

don’t knock it til you try it

Solas 5:01

Regrettably I am unable to try it from this distance

Ellana 5:02
awww, do you feel left out?

We can play our own game

**Solas 5:03**

I’m not sure I am partial to the type of games you play

**Ellana 5:04**

would you rather . . .

be able to fly or be invisible?

**Solas 5:04**

Ah, an interesting choice

**Solas 5:05**

I would have to say invisibility

**Ellana 5:05**

What would you use it for?

**Solas 5:06**

To satisfy my own curiosity

**Ellana 5:06**

you would definitely break into people’s houses, wouldn’t you

**Solas 5:07**

Not to steal

Just to look

What about you?
I don't know if I could turn down flying
I would never be stuck in traffic again

Ellana makes a B on her next test and takes Zevran out dancing to thank him. It feels great to let off some steam after three weeks of the endless flurry of reading assignments and coding and three-hour classes. If Dorian hadn’t limited the amount of classes she wanted to take this summer, she would probably be losing her damn mind right now.

Right now she sits at the bar, catching her breath with a tall glass of ice water and watching Zevran salsa with one of the regulars.

“Excuse me, Serah.”

Ellana turns and sees a tall, dark haired man leaning against the bar beside her. He gives her a hesitant smile. She braces herself for awkward flirting or the offer to buy her a drink. The regulars have grown accustomed to her lack of response to those kind of advances (and several of them think she and Zevran are dating anyway, not that she does a lot to discourage that idea). But occasionally a new guy (or girl) will try to ask her out and she’s got to scramble for some funny way to let them down gently.

“Yeah?”

“I couldn’t help but notice how well your friend dances,” he says. “You as well, of course, but he in particular . . .”

Ah. Ellana smiles to herself. Though she gets a fair bit of interest at this club, she finds herself fielding questions about Zev more often than not, from not-so-subtle inquiries about his relationship status, to eyes darting to her ring finger, or musings on his type (everyone) or availability that evening.

Her gaze flits discreetly up his trim waist and broad shoulders and the hints of scarring down his arms. He’s got that sexy-but-dangerous vibe going on that she knows Zevran will appreciate.

“He reminds of someone I knew as a teenager, back in Antiva,” the man continues and the words drop like stones between them. “Could you tell me his name?”

For a moment Ellana’s mouth forgets how to work.


“Ah.” He looks crestfallen, but there’s something in his eyes that makes her feel exposed in her lie. “I must have been mistaken.”

“Yeah, the lighting in here is pretty dim,” she says. “Sorry I couldn’t help you.”

“Would you like to dance?”

He looks at her with the intensity of a hawk, and every inch of her screams no.
“I would love to, but I’m a student at the university and I’ve got a test tomorrow. Thanks anyway,” she says.

She gives him no time to reply before she slaps some bills on the table and ducks back into the crowd. Zevran has danced himself into a corner near the back door.

She cuts in between him and a young man doing nothing to hide his lusty expression. Thankfully she’s a couple of inches taller than him and blocks the view from the bar. She grabs his belt buckle and pulls him closer.

“Hello,” he says, grinning, running his hand down her back.

She fights an eye roll.

“There’s someone looking for you,” she says in his ear.

“There’s always someone looking for me,” he says.

“He says you remind him of someone he used to know in Antiva,” she adds.

Zevran goes very still in her arms.

“Where?”

“Tall guy at the bar. Green shirt. Next to the woman in the purple dress.”

She can barely hear his sharp intake of breath over the music, but she definitely feels his finger digging into her hip.

“I see.”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes. I know him.”

Ellana takes a deep, calm breath to deter the complete freakout that threatens the edges of her mind.

“What do we do? Call the cops? Slip out of here? He asked me your name, and I said it was Alistair.”

She’s babbling, she knows it, but Zevran doesn’t seem to be paying attention. He can’t take his eyes off the man at the bar. It’s a look of unmistakable longing.

“He’s an old friend of mine.”

“Are you . . . going to talk to him?”

Judging by his silence, he’s actually considering it. Ellana doesn’t know if she should stop him or if she even could.

“No,” he says softly, heavy with grief. “Come. Let’s get you home.”

It says something that he slips them both out the back door instead of the front, but Ellana doesn’t question him.

When he pulls up to her apartment, she hesitates before giving him back his helmet.
“What are you going to do?” she asks. “I mean, do you want to sleep over here?”

He winks at her, but it lacks its usual spark. “Are you finally granting me permission to give you the most passionate night of your life?”

“I’m serious, Zev. Would you be safer with us?”

He takes the helmet gently but firmly from her hands. “I appreciate the offer, Ellana, but he didn’t see me. I know what to do. You have no need for worry.”

“Of course I do,” she says. “You’re one of my best friends! I don’t want to see you get shot in the middle of campus! Or whisked away to some remote corner of fucking Tevinter where no one will ever see you again.”

“None of those things are going to happen, mi amor. There are . . . things in place. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” she says, but she purses her mouth in a thin line.

Maybe she’s being paranoid, but Zevran does not seem as concerned as he should be. She remembers that look of longing on his face and wonders if he’s going to do something . . . incredibly stupid.

And she doesn’t know what she could do to prevent that.

Zevran may not be worried, but Ellana has plenty of anxiety for the both of them. She can’t walk to and from class or the cafeteria without keeping her eyes peeled for the man at the bar. Tips and tricks from her spars with Iron Bull and Cassandra run through her mind like ticker tape, and her search history reveals futile attempts to find out if she should call the cops without telling Zevran.

In the end, she does nothing, frozen with indecision. She doesn’t even breathe a word of it to the rest of their friends for fear of putting them or Zevran in more jeopardy.

On her way back from dinner, Sera leaps out from one of the trees with an unholy scream.

Ellana lets out one of her own, whirling around and jabbing Sera in the throat before she realizes what has happened.

Sera collapses on the ground, choking and giving her the middle finger.

“What . . . the fuck!” she gasps.

“Sorry!” Ellana kneels down beside Sera. “I’m so sorry. You scared the shit out of me!”

“That’s . . . the . . . idea! Maker’s balls.”

Sera climbs to her feet, waving off Ellana’s offers of help.

“Shit. Remind me to warn the others,” she says, rubbing her throat. “I guess all that sparring with Cassandra and Iron Bull isn’t just to feel up their muscles.”

“I want my own muscles for people to feel up.”

“You owe me several drinks for this,” Sera warns.
I owe you a lot more than that, Ellana thinks, already planning, despite her nerves, her revenge.

“What are you staring at?”

Ellana side-eyes the decidedly grumpy elf dressed in rumpled slacks and a grey hoodie that’s slumped against Varric’s kitchen counter. She knows his shock of white hair is natural because of the unshaven scruff on his cheeks. But it’s actually the strange tattoos that carry down his neck that she can’t look away from.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” she says.

“Don’t mind Fenris,” says Varric, stepping into the kitchen. “He’s just grouchy because he had a red-eye flight. What is the lady’s coffee order today?”

A few weeks ago Varric splurged on an Orlesian press coffee maker complete with milk foamer worth a price Ellana decidedly did not want to know. It is even more lavish than the one Josephine bought for their apartment. Since Josephine took off at the beginning of summer, Ellana has been heading over to Varric’s for coffee. Slowly but surely he’s been experimenting through the entire menu at the coffee shop in the Student Union.

“I don’t care, as long as there’s caffeine in it,” she says. “So, who’s Fenris?”

“An old friend from college,” Fenris responds, his voice deeper than she expected.

She nods at his tattoos. “Are you Dalish?”

“No.” The word is curt and almost sharp enough to cut.

“Well, okay then.”

“Sounds like someone needs a nap,” Varric sings as he takes the jug of milk from the fridge.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a petulant child,” Fenris snaps.

“Then stop acting like one. Get your ass in the spare room and catch a few hours of sleep. Goddamn, you’re grouchy.”

Ellana has never heard Varric talk so coarsely to someone before, and she tenses, waiting for a fight. But Fenris throws a baleful glare Varric’s way before ducking down the hall.

“You have . . . some interesting friends,” she says.

“And you haven’t even met Hawke yet.” says Varric. The hum of the Orlesian press fills the room.

“What’s Hawke like?”

Varric takes some time to answer, mixing what looks like a mocha with extra whipped cream in a to-go up.

“Hawke . . . takes the cake. We’ll leave it at that. Come on, I’ll walk you to class.”

After a few days of Ellana fruitlessly worrying, Varric drags them all out the Hanged Man. Since last
summer, he’s established a weekly standing bar date for whoever’s still left on campus. Ellana catches a ride with Zevran since Krem and Josie are spending the first few weeks of summer at her beach house.

She stops short just through the doorway so suddenly that Zevran collides into her.

Zevran’s old Crow mate sits at the bar. Though the club was dark, Ellana recognizes his dark, Tevine features, a rarity so far south.

Immediately she turns back around and shoves Zevran back through the door and pulls him out of sight.

“Your friend’s there,” she hisses. “I don’t think he saw us. We should get out of here before he steps outside.”

“He knows I’m here,” says Zevran. “He’s always known. His presence is not a coincidence.”

“Well, shit. We should get the cops. Like, now.”

He shakes his head and pushes Ellana gently away from him. “It’s time I find out what he wants.”

“He wants to kill you.”

“Perhaps,” he says with a shrug. “But he won’t do it in the middle of a public bar. We weren’t raised to be that sloppy.”

Ellana does not know what to do with his cavalier attitude. “So you’re just going to waltz in there and say ‘hey, long time no see’?!”

He pats the side of her face. “You worry too much, my dear,” he says, not unkindly, and heads for the door.

“I worry exactly the right amount,” she mutters, following him.

The moment the man at the bar sees Zevran a slow, knowing smile crosses his face. Ellana fights the urge to hide and keeps her place behind Zevran. This man definitely knew she was lying to him at the club even as she did it.

“Taliesen?” Zevran steps up to the man. “Is that you, my friend?”

Taliesen immediately hops off the bar stool and pulls Zevran into an embrace, slapping him on the back.

“Zevran Arainai, back from the dead!” They pull away, Taliesen’s grin much wider and less calculating.

“What are you doing here?”

“I got out, just like you.”

Ellana and Zevran’s eyebrows raise almost simultaneously.

“You did? When?”

“A few years after you. You were right. After Rinna, everything was . . .” he trails off and sighs. “Anyway, it took me a long time to track you down, but I had to see you again. Even if my
A protection officer is going to have a heart attack.”

Zevran grips Taliesen’s shoulder. “Come, let me buy you a drink. We have a lot of time to catch up on.”

Taliesen looks over Zevran’s head to Ellana. “Will you friend be okay with that?”

Zevran grins at her. “Ellana is very jealous. But she will have to live.”

Taliesen laughs. “You always had a way with girls.”

“And boys.”

A look passes between them, one heavy with history, and Ellana remembers the longing on Zevran’s face the first time he saw Taliesen.

“And everyone in between,” adds Taliesen.

Zevran drops a drink order off at the bar and then leads Taliesen up to one of the card tables in the upstairs balcony. Ellana watches them go, letting out a deep breath.

“Everything okay?” Varric comes up behind her.

She tears her gaze away from the stairs to where he stands beside her.

“Yes,” she says.

Behind them, Iron Bull and Dorian walk in, Bull ducking just in time to keep from cracking his horns on the door frame. She can always tell how drunk he is by how many times he forgets to do that.

“Whatever you want, it’s on me,” Varric says. “You look like you need to destress. Maker’s balls, what have those classes been doing to you?”

“Their worst,” she jokes weakly.

She orders a beer and heads to the pool table. It’s definitely unsettling that Taliesen was able to track Zevran down when no one is supposed to be able to, but he’s clearly not here to kill Zevran. It will do Zevran a lot of good to see someone else in the same situation he’s in. It’s not like anyone here at Skyhold could possibly relate. Ellana knows how that kind of situational isolation feels.

She really needs to chill out.

“Alright,” she says, racking the balls as Cassandra ducks through the doorway. “I call Cass.”

“Hell no,” protests Varric. “Every time you two team up, you win. It’s an unfair advantage.”

“You think you’re gonna win even if I have a handicap?”

“We’ll at least have a shot. Especially if there’s money riding on this. I’m taking Cassandra.”

Dorian opens his mouth to protest, and Varric holds up a hand.

“It’s my bar. I call dibs.”

“My uncle told me men would never fight over me if I cut off all my hair, but look at me now,”
mutter Cassandra with deep sarcasm.


Cold hands wrap around her shoulders from behind, fingernails pinching her collarbones. Ellana stumbles forward with a shriek, beer sloshing onto the floor and narrowly missing her shoes.

Sera cackles in her ear. “Take me where? Somewhere nice?”

“Take you to hell,” Ellana cries, whirling around. She tries to wack Sera with a cue stick, but she just jumps nimblly out of the way, laughing at Ellana.

“Alright, settle down, you two,” says Cassandra, a small glass of wine in her hand. “I want top shelf wine, and I’m not paying for it, so let’s get down to business.”

Ellana loses herself into the next couple of games. When she’s not scaring the shit out of people, Sera makes an excellent partner. She has intuitive aim, knocking balls into their holes almost without having to look, a fact that she plays up obnoxiously to Cassandra and Varric.

But she doesn’t spare them much thought, her mind turning over to planning her revenge on Sera. She’ll probably try to scare Ellana again before the night is over, and the perfect place to jump people is the side alley. There’s an old lean-to where Varric stashes the recycling, and it’s the perfect spot to stake out Sera sneaking into the alley way.

So, at about a quarter to midnight, Ellana raises her arms and yawns.

“Alright, guys, I’m wiped after this game. I’m taking the train back to campus.”

“Already?” Sera whines. “We’ve almost got fifty sovs out of these suckers!”

“Sorry, but you know my aim goes to shit when I get tired.” Ellana leans her pool cue against the far wall. “Night, everyone.”

She bids her farewells, steps out the door with a wave to Zev on the balcony, and immediately takes a right into the alley. The lean-to stinks of beer and something vaguely rotten, but it’ll all be worth it when Sera creeps down the alley to sneak up on Ellana and gets the shit scared out of her.

Sure enough, a few moments later Ellana hears the back door creak open. She tenses and waits for Sera to pass by, but she never comes.

Of course, she might decide to keep playing. Sera could probably take on Cassandra all by herself. She and Varric have been not-so-subtly trying to impress Cassandra with trick shots while Dorian and Iron Bull roll their eyes.

Taking care not to let her shoes crunch on the gravel, Ellana slowly peeps over the bins of glass bottles.

She catches a flash of yellow hair – too short to be Sera’s.

“You’re still smoking, Taliesen? You know you’re going to pay for that later.”

Ellana ducks back down in a flash.

“It’s my last habit from the old days. In a stupid way, I’m reluctant to let it go,” says Taliesen.

If she leaves now, it’s going to look weird – like maybe she’s stalking Zevran because she’s
obsessed with him.

“Have you ever thought about going back?” Taliesen asks.

“No,” Zevran says, almost without hesitation. “Never.”

“I didn’t used to. The way things were run, what they justified doing to us when we were kids . . . But I’ve been hearing rumors from back home. The old guard is gone. Between me and you they’ve all been carted off or killed. There’s no one to lead the Crows anymore.”

“There will be other gangs to scrabble over who’s left. And then the Crows will be just a memory.”

“It’s . . . almost a shame.”

Ellana goes cold. Slowly she raises up just enough that her eyes peer over the edge of the tallest bin. Zevran leans against the wall under the outdoor lamp, but Taliesen keeps to the shadows, the tip of his cigarette glowing like a star.

“Is it?” says Zevran.

“The Crows have been infamous for almost five hundred years. They shaped history. To let them die out slowly and fade into obscurity is . . . almost tragic.”

“And what is the alternative I wonder?”

“Rebirth.”

Zevran steps away from the wall.

“You want to swoop in and take control of the Crows.”

It is not a question.

“It’s the perfect moment, Zev,” says Taliesen. “We were legends before we left.”

“We were children.”

“And now we’re not. They don’t have to know the truth. We’ll make up a story. Zevran Arainai, back from the dead. You will be a phoenix rising from the ashes, and they will follow you anywhere.”

“I got out for a reason, Taliesen.”

“And I did, too. But we would be in control. We can get rid of everything we hated. No more children, no drug deals, no shady contracts. We could gain the same respectability as the House of Repose.”

“How long have you been thinking of this?”

Taliesen puts out his cigarette. “Do you really think me finding you now after all these years is a coincidence? I’ve been in contact with some of our old crew – what’s left of them. The Crows are in hiding, scrambling for leadership. They still remember you.”

“And who would those be?”

Taliesen laughs softly. “I’m not jeopardizing their names, not here in this stinking alley. Leave with
me tonight. I have an unmarked car ready. We could disappear into the night, just like old times.”

Ellana clenches her fist, hardly daring to breathe.

“ The Crows need a rebirth,” says Zevran almost too softly for Ellana to hear. “And I have no doubt that you could build them into something glorious. But I can’t live that life anymore.”

“ You wouldn’t be on the bottom of the ranks anymore, taking on the worst contracts. You wouldn’t have to dirty your hands at all, sitting at the top.”

She can’t see Zevran’s expression well with the light behind him, but she hears his sigh.

“ The entire business is built on blood. I’m sorry, my friend, but I won’t have it any longer. I’ve moved on.”

They stare at each other for a long, tense moment.

“ I can’t believe it. Zevran Arainai, gone soft.”

Silently, Ellana curls her hand around the neck of an empty bottle. All the easy camaraderie, the dreaming, has been sucked from the air, leaving a tension thick enough to suffocate.

“ I have found value in other things.”

“ Like what? Your computers?” Taliesen spits. “Your drinking and your dancing? Classes you don’t even attend half the time? Zevran Arainai was a name people feared, even after you left. Are you really going to let yourself settle for this?”

“ I no longer have to prove myself through pain. I wish you could be free of it yourself.”

Zevran clasps Taliesen’s shoulder. “Goodbye, my friend. I hope you take care of yourself.”

Taliesen stares at Zevran, hesitating a moment before placing his own hand on Zev’s shoulder.

“ And the same to you.”

Then Zevran drops his arm and turns to the back door. He has barely taken three steps when Taliesen pulls something from his boot. It flashes in the street light.

A knife.

There’s a moment of frozen horror, of total denial of the reality in front of her. It keeps the shouts of warning trapped in her throat, wasting precious seconds.

So she does the only thing she can do.

She darts out from behind the bins and smashes the bottle against Taliesen’s head. The hit stuns him long enough for her to kick him behind the knees, jumping on his back as he staggers down, locking her forearm around his throat to cut off his air supply.

It happens too fast to process. His hands come up and somehow she finds herself thrown over his shoulder, hitting the ground hard enough to make her dizzy, his body a heavy weight on top of her. One hand wraps around her throat. The knife gleams in the other, and it takes all her rapidly depleting strength to grip his wrist and keep it from coming at her throat, all while her vision blackens.
“Ellana!”

Like a blur, Zevran collides into Taliesen, sending them both scrabbling onto the ground beside her. Before Ellana can do anything besides roll over on her hands and knees and gasp for air, the alley is suddenly full of men with guns.

“Drop your weapon, Taliesen Arainai. I will not hesitate to shoot you.”

The voice sounds unmistakably familiar. Fenris?

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Taliesen get pulled up from the ground and shoved against the brick wall. Zevran immediately runs to her and pulls her to her feet. His hands roam over her face and neck, feather light, looking for wounds.

“Call an ambulance,” the man with the gun barks.

“Come,” Zevran says tightly. With an arm around her shoulder, he guides her, stumbling, through the back door and into the kitchen.

Varric descends upon her immediately. She can tell by the large, rough hands that help her steady herself in a chair.

Shouts from her friends blare distantly in the background, mixed with Varric’s shouts to keep their distance. Ellana keeps her eyes shut. Her hands are shaking and she feels strangely sleepy. Zevran’s body is warm beside hers.

In minutes an ambulance pulls up to the front. Zevran guides her to the front door, the both of them stumbling, and then into the ambulance. The paramedics descend on them as the ambulance takes off.

“Where are you bleeding?” one of them demands.

“I’m not – I’m not bleeding,” she says faintly.

“Look at your hands.”

She glances down, and in the bright lights of the ambulance she sees them sticky and red.

“It’s not her that’s bleeding,” says Zevran.

She looks over at him for the first time in real light.

The front of his shirt is slashed open and red.

Ellana gets off easy with a light concussion (though the series of tests she went through at the ER were worse than the pain in her head) and bruising around her throat.

Zevran disappears down the hallway, rushed through the double doors in one of the gurneys. Ellana demands, in raspy, painful tones, to know where he’s going, but the nurses are too adamant on taking her in for x-rays and CAT scans and blood work to answer.

By the time she finally gets back to her curtained-off “room” in the ER, she’s about to seriously lose her shit.
But the side curtain pulls over to reveal Zevran sitting on one of the beds, with Fenris, of all people, perched on the side of the bed next to him, a small notebook in hand. Bandages peek from underneath Zevran’s hospital gown.

They haven’t inflicted that indignity on her just yet.

“Zev,” she whispers, struggling to get up despite the nurse pushing her back down by her shoulder.

“It’s just stitches, Ellana,” he assures her. “Nothing more. And you?”

Ellana sighs in relief and leans back in the bed. “Minor concussion.”

Fenris stands up and walks to her side of the room.

“When you’ve recovered your voice, I need to take your statement,” he says.

“Statement?” Ellana sits up. “Are you . . . police?”

So it was his voice she heard in the alley.

“Of a sort,” he says. He sets his notebook and pen on the little table by the heart monitor. “It’s ideal that you write down as much as you remember now, before you start to forget. I’ll return in a couple of days to record your official statement. I’m glad to see you both safe.”

He shakes her hand, nods over at Zevran, and ducks out from behind the curtain.

They keep them both overnight for observations. Ellana’s phone has blown up with at least a hundred texts. Apparently visiting hours ended before they had even arrived at the hospital, so Ellana spent at least an hour reassuring everyone (and securing rides home for her and Zev).

Long after the lights are out and the bustle of the evening settles into something quieter, a shadow slips into her room.

“What you did was incredibly and utterly stupid.”

Ellana squints at the figure in the dim light of the machines. “Zevran?”

She hadn’t even heard the curtain move.

She can just make out his posture – tense, his arms crossed, coiled like a cat ready to spring. It’s so different from his usual loose-limbed slouching.

“Are you . . . mad?” she whispers. It hurts. “I . . . saved your . . . life.”

He sits on the edge of her bed, leaning in close enough that the red light from her monitor reflects in his eyes.

“You didn’t save my life,” he breathes. “You almost got yourself killed playing the hero when no one needed or asked for it.”

Even through the dark Ellana can only stare at him.

Is he shitting her right now?
“You risked your life for nothing. I had everything under control. The entire moment was planned and you nearly ruined it.”

“He had . . . a knife,” she hisses.

“Of course he did! He’s a Crow. Do you even understand what that is?”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “I’m not scared of . . . some old . . . thug.”

He leans back, pinching the bridge of his nose, and lets out a deep breath.

“Ellana, have you ever killed anyone?”

She huffs a frustrated sigh. “No.”

“I have.”

The words drop heavily between them, dragging with them a heavy silence.

“I have slit people’s throats in their beds while their children slept downstairs. I have shot people from across rooftops. I have poisoned people at their birthday dinners. The only reason why I am not rotting in prison where I belong is because I sold out everyone I knew and loved. And Taliesen has done even worse things. Unspeakable things. Things that blacken and ruin a man’s soul. You think because you’re tall and you grew up doing farmwork that you can take on an Antivan Crow. That stupidity almost got you murdered before I could save you.”

Ellana swallows. “I couldn’t . . . just . . . watch.”

“Do you think Fenris was here to visit Varric? He asked for my help in arresting Taliesen a month ago. I lured him out and recorded his confession. I knew that knife was in his hands before even he did. All you did was jeopardize your life for nothing.”

“You didn’t . . . say anything.”

Zevran lets out an exasperated groan. “I did. I distinctly remember telling you that I had plans in place. For you to not worry. But did you listen? Did you trust me? No.”

A muleish urge to keep arguing rises in her, and she takes refuge in it, rather than admit defeat.

“That’s not . . . telling me . . . anything.”

“It’s clear the conversation is over, but the only thing keeping Ellana from throwing one last remark in an attempt to have the last word is the deep pain in her throat. So instead she rolls her eyes and closes them, too angry to bid him goodbye or even watch him leave.

After a moment she feels his breath by her ear, though she didn’t hear even the barest scuff of his feet.

“There’s a difference between brave and reckless, and you need to learn it. Taliesen’s life is not worth yours. And for that matter, neither is mine.”

When she opens her eyes, he is gone, the curtain between them undisturbed.
Who could sleep after that? By now she can tune out the constant beep of the heart monitor and even the glow of all the blinky lights around her. But Zevran’s words just run laps around her thoughts, refusing to give her any peace.

She’s starting to realize that the more she wants to dig her heels in and argue, the more she knows that she’s wrong. It’s a trait still stubbornly clinging to her from childhood, one she can’t seem to outgrow. Ellana has never taken criticism very well, especially if she knows she deserves it.

And this time, she definitely deserves it.

It would be easy to excuse her ignorance. Dalish elves have nothing even close to organized crime. Her knowledge of the Crows is vague and nebulous, based mostly on the reactions of others.

But she kept herself in the dark on purpose because she didn’t really want to know anything about a past that Zevran seemed so desperate to get away from. When she saw Taliesen in that alley, she didn’t see an assassin, or a psychopath, or a monster. She saw some guy barely taller than her, and she thought she could take him.

Since she was eight years old, Ellana has always been taller and stronger than people expected, and she’s never shied away from a fight. And sure, she’s gotten her ass kicked plenty of times, but she’s always been able to hold her own, and well . . .

Maybe it’s possible that she’d gotten a little too cocky about it.

Because, of course, Zevran is not stupid. She knows, on some level, that he covers up a lot of his own capabilities underneath the hedonistic man-slut routine he puts on. But she saw the knife, and she saw skinny, cavalier Zevran, and she threw herself in because it never occurred to her that she would be in over her head and he wouldn’t.

The knee-kick, the forearm choke, she executed those moves perfectly. Hell, she had brought Iron Bull to his knees with that combination just last week and he’s three times the size of a human male. And yet it didn’t faze Taliesen in the slightest. In fact, he used that exact maneuver to throw her on the ground and nearly slit her throat.

The truth is, if Zevran hadn’t been faster, she would not be here.

Ellana sighs and rubs her hand over her face.

Maybe she needs to start letting go of the knee-jerk instinct to throw down every time she runs into conflict.

Istie would be proud, at least.

The next morning when Zevran and Ellana are released they find Cassandra and Varric already waiting on them in the lobby, both of them carrying equally large coffee mugs.

For a split second, when they both look up at the same time to see her and Zevran stroll through the lobby and exchange concerned looks, Ellana feels like she’s stepped into some alternative universe where she and her brother are getting picked up by their parents after having done something stupid.

They sit in the backseat of Varric’s car, listening to him fill the strange and tense silence with a rundown of events after Ellana and Zevran got in the ambulance. He tries to put a humorous spin on things, describing how Iron Bull scared the hell out of some cop with SDS (Small Dick Syndrome)
or how one of his regulars had to slip out the side door before someone smelled the blunt he had smoked earlier.

Ellana appreciates it even though she can’t really show it right now.

They drop Zevran off at his apartment and then Varric turns around in his seat to look at her.

“So. Your place or mine?”

Usually that kind of remark is accompanied by a grin or a wink, but Varric’s face is serious.

“What?”

“Do you want to head back home, or do you want to hang out at my place for a while?”

The thought of sitting in her empty apartment, without Josephine or Krem, unnerves her.

“I . . . could hang out,” she admits.

“Alright.”

So Varric takes her home. She’s spent so much time in his apartment, she has her own towel. Which, once they come inside, she fishes out for an overdue hot shower.

Even in the flattering lighting that Varric specially installed over the mirror, the bruises on her neck are starkly horrifying. The entire front of her throat is red and purple, with dark bruising fingertips painted on the sides of her neck. Her throat suddenly feels hot with tears, and it hurts to swallow them back down.

She turns her back to the mirror and sponges the water from her hair.

Cassandra is still in the living room when she re-emerges, and they watch trashy reality TV and laugh at Cassandra’s scandalized reactions to some of the utter stupidity that occurs on the dating shows. Varric makes her hot tea and honey for her throat, which hurts more today than it did last night, and nobody asks her any questions.

The morning stretches into the afternoon and into the night. All the rest of her friends drop in and out throughout the day. They order takeout and play card games, and when Ellana anxiously looks at the growing dark outside, Varric tells her that the couch contains a pull-out bed.

She has never been so grateful for him in her entire life.

Fenris arrives just after Cassandra bids them goodnight, looking utterly haggard and even grumpier than usual.

Ellana digs his notebook out of her pocket. “I have . . . your statement,” she says, her voice rasping from what little talking she’s done today.

Fenris looks over at her, eyes dipping to her throat. “Save it for the morning,” he says. “Is she staying the night?” he asks Varric.

“Yep.”

“You can take the bedroom,” he says to Ellana. “I’ll move my things into the living room.”

“You don’t --” she says, but he holds up a hand.
“I’m not going to do much sleeping tonight anyway, and I wouldn’t want to keep you up with my work. Please, go ahead.”

Even with the exhaustion from a terrible night in the hospital, Ellana can’t relax enough for sleep. Flashes of last night, the hard smack of the asphalt under her head, the weight of Taliesen’s body on top of hers, the gleam of the knife, the horrifying lack of breath.

No matter how she struggled, no matter how tall or strong she thought she was, she would have never shaken him off.

It’s a sobering thought, just how close she came to death. And even though he’s in custody, she still doesn’t feel quite safe. There’s a hundred “what if” scenarios running through her head. What if he breaks out and finds her? What if he finds and kills Zevran? What if he had friends he didn’t tell anyone about and they find and kill her or Zevran?

She tries reading one of Varric’s many, many books, but most of the selection is crime and dirty cops and a host of other topics that Ellana doesn’t want to think about.

And if she reads the romance, she’ll never be able to look him or Cassandra in the eye again.

So Ellana eventually finds herself padding into the kitchen to find Fenris sitting at the island, file folders spread like confetti around him. The coffee maker gurgles happily on the counter, the pot nearly full.

The couch bed is untouched.

“Wow,” she says.

Fenris doesn’t even look up from his laptop. “Trouble sleeping?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s plenty of coffee if you want.”

Ellana helps herself to a small cup, weighing her next words as she spoons in the creamer.

“Can I give you my statement now?” she asks. Her voice can only come out in a whisper, but it’s worth this discomfort to tell him.

Fenris pauses at that and looks up from his laptop. “Are you sure? I’m not impatient for it. You’ve been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours.”

She leans against the counter. “I think that telling you might . . . get it out of my head.”

“I see.” He stares at her again, his eyes so deeply somber. He’s worse than Cassandra, even. But there’s something else in them, too. A kindness that lurks under the surface. An understanding.

Slowly he gathers the files into a neat pile and sets it off to the side, leaving space for her beside him. Ellana leaves her coffee on the counter a moment to fetch the notebook, and then she climbs up on one of the bar stools beside him. With his recorder between them and the notebook in her hand, she haltingly explains what happened last night. Even with coffee and water, her throat is still sore, but it feels good to get it out.

Fenris is the perfect, attentive audience. He asks her neutral questions to add detail or explain
something, but offers no judgment. If he’s pissed that she nearly ruined their sting, he doesn’t show it. Or, rather, it’s hard to separate it from his general air of grouchiness.

When she finishes, Fenris types some quick notes on his laptop. The silence feels awkward, and she squirms at how this stranger got to hear and witness one of the worst moments of her life with barely an expression on his face.

“How are you involved in all this?” she asks him. “If . . . you can tell me.”

“You know that Zevran is in witness protection, correct?”

She nods.

“I’m the officer in charge of his anonymity and protection. I keep tabs on him. He checks in with me every month. I help him find places to live and an identity to construct.”

“No offense, but you . . . are terrible at that last one,” she says.

Fenris huffs and then the corners of his lips lift in the barest hint of a smile.

“I don’t think there is a force on Thedas that could suppress his sense of self,” he says. “It’s partly his genius with computers that has kept him hidden and safe.”

Ellana swallows. “Are there . . . are there still a lot out there?”

“To be honest? No.” He takes a long sip from his mug. “Taliesen wasn’t lying when he said the Crows were in shambles. Zevran’s testimony broke the back of the organization, and their in-fighting destroyed what was left. Right now they are on the precipice of ruin or resurrection. And I am going to make sure that they are ruined.”

He takes a look at her, his gaze softening. “I know right now it feels like your entire sense of safety has been violated. But you are safe. What is left of the Crows have no idea that you exist, and they are going to be too worried about me to care about you.”

She gives him a smile of her own, small and a little shaky, but more relieved than she’s felt all day.

“Thanks. You’re scary-looking . . . so that does make me feel better.”

He grins for real this time, wide and slightly feral and definitely befitting his name.

They talk for a short while after, mostly about Varric.

“What was younger Varric like?” She can barely imagine it.

“The ponytail was longer. Other than that, nothing else has changed. The years have not granted him much maturity, I’m afraid.”

“I guess that’s why he stayed to be a professor,” she says. “That way he never has to leave.”

“An astute observation.”

A yawn catches her by surprise. “I think . . . I think I can actually sleep now,” she says.

“Yes, I think I should do the same. It’s not like any of this is going anywhere.” Fenris looks at the paperwork in mild disgust.
“Thank you for... all of it,” she says, rather lamely. “I don’t know what would have happened if
you weren’t there.”

The tightness of his mouth softens almost into a smile. “Best not to think about it. And you’re
welcome. Goodnight, Ellana.”

“Night, Fenris.”

She sleeps for nearly fourteen hours. Varric could have thrown a wild orgy in the living room and
she would not have noticed. By the time she staggers into the kitchen, the apartment is empty save
for a note from Varric sitting on the kitchen island.

*Hey sleepyhead,*

*Had to come in there around noon to check for a pulse. Coffee is ready to go, just turn it on. And
you are welcome to all the leftovers in the fridge.*

Ellana does exactly that. Sated with caffeine and carbs, she fills a to-go cup and heads over to
Zevran’s apartment. For a long moment, no one answers the door, and Ellana turns to maybe track
someone down at the Student Union, when the door cracks open.

“Ellana?”

Zevran leans in the doorway, dressed in sleep pants and not much else. Several angry red stitches
travel in a diagonal line down his chest. His eyes are dark. Ellana extends the to-go coffee to him.

“Can we take a walk or something?”

She almost expects him to say no. He has every right to be seriously pissed at her for a long time. But
he nods his head.

“Of course.”

They head out into the park, underneath her favorite tree. Right now, in the hot afternoon sunshine,
the breeze blowing in their hair, bees buzzing over the clover, that night feels a million years away
and her fears seem ridiculous. But of course, all that will change once the sun sets.

Ellana feels a bit like she lived in a glass bubble before and now it’s – not exactly shattered, per se –
but definitely full of cracks, which has destroyed the illusion of its invincibility. The world is hungry
and angry outside, ready to stick its hands in and fuck with her. Of course the world has always been
hungry and angry, but it’s never gotten its hands on her before.

She realizes, now, why Zevran wanted her to stay uninvolved: to protect that glass bubble.

“How is your chest?” she asks.

“It’s fine,” he says. “The cut was not deep – just long. It’s nothing I have not suffered before. And
you? How is your throat?”

She pulls her hair back from her neck and allows him to look. Not having looked into a mirror since
that last shower, she has no idea how much the bruises have faded.

Zevran slowly and oh so carefully tilts her jaw upwards. His expression is rather terrifying.
“If Fenris had not shown up I would have killed him with my bare hands for that,” he murmurs.

Ellana nearly shivers because it’s not an idle threat coming from him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “You were right, it was stupid and reckless of me and totally unnecessary. I just... I saw him going to hurt you, and I didn’t think. I just... did.”

He looks over at her, eyes dipping towards her throat, as if he can’t look away. And then he does force himself to look away.

“And I should thank you. For thinking me worth such a risk.”

It’s a sentence that should sound bitter and sarcastic, but coming from Zevran, it’s nothing but utterly, painfully sincere.

She grabs his arm. “Your life is not worthless, Zevran. And it’s definitely not worth less than mine.”

His gaze softens from his earlier aloofness. “You know, there are more and more days when I actually believe that.”

She swallows. “I hope that someday it’s everyday.”

Zevran leans against the trunk of the tree, his posture loosening, his face tilted in the sun. He lifts his arm up as a peace offering and Ellana takes it, leaning against him.

“Who knows what the future holds,” he says. “I didn’t think this day would come, much less all the ones that came before it.”

“Amen to that,” she says.

They sit and enjoy the peace with a gratitude that Ellana has not felt before. Zevran plays with a lock of her hair, and she breathes in the smell of freshly mowed grass.

“Fenris has offered me something I don’t think I will refuse,” he says after a while.

“Don’t tell me you actually seduced him.”

“Oh, I am still trying that one. It’s a work in progress. No, actually, he offered me a job.”

“What?”

She twists around to look at him.

“He thinks with my... unique abilities, that I could help him track down the rest of the Crows. And then onto other criminals.”

“And... you’re considering it?”

He shrugs. “To be honest, I never considered working on the side of the law ever in my life. And I know there are some things I can never make up for, but this would make a good start, I think.”

The thought of Zevran, a silent stalker online, seeking and rooting out criminals of the worst sort when they thought they could hide forever, seems rather fitting.

“It’s a great start.”
“I have only a few credits to complete an actual degree. I should be graduating with you, as a matter of fact.”

“Good. I’m going to need some serious entertainment if I’m going to make it through that ceremony.”

“I happen to be very talented at entertaining beautiful women.”

“I know.”

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Solas 5:15 PM

Forgive the intrusion, but Dorian told me you were in the hospital

Are you alright? How are you feeling?

Ellana 5:17 PM

of course he did

big mouth

and I’m totally, perfectly fine

Solas 5:18

You were attacked by an Antivan Crow

And you’re fine?

Ellana 5:19

to be fair I busted a beer bottle on his head first

so kind of deserved it I guess?

Her fingers hover over her phone, wincing at how cavalier she sounds.

but zevran saved my ass and then the cops showed up

I didn’t really do a whole lot
Solas 5:20

It’s still very alarming

I’m relieved to hear that you are safe

and your injuries minor

Am I right to infer that if Dorian hadn’t told me

I would have never known?

Ellana 5:21

damn straight

its kind of embarrassing

and ive already fielded one tearful phone call from josie

Solas 5:22

It’s a frightening ordeal to be sure

Have you spoken to someone about it?

I’m always available.

Ellana 5:23

me and zev talk

but ill bug you in the night if I cant sleep

Solas 5:23

Please do

Ellana 1:24 AM

would u rather
star in an action/adventure movie or a romantic comedy?

Solas 1:30 AM

Can’t sleep?

Ellana 1:30

u gonna answer the question?

Solas 1:32

Romantic comedy

Ellana 1:32

not the answer I expected lol

why

Solas 1:33

I’m not sure I could handle the stress of an action movie

Romantic comedies seem . . . light.

There’s always a happy ending

It’s a nice fantasy to indulge in

Ellana 1:34

so ur a sap is what ur saying?

Solas 1:34

And you’re an adrenaline junkie

Ellana 1:35

I never said what I would pick
Solas 1:35

Are you suggesting you would also pick romantic comedy?

Ellana 1:35

hell no I am not

Solas 1:36

then I rest my case
And there is nothing wrong with sentimentality
On occasion

Ellana 1:36

sap

Solas 1:37

Has Josephine returned yet?

Ellana 1:37

nope not till next month

Solas 1:37

Have you thought of inviting your keeper to visit you?

Ellana 1:38

...no

Solas 1:38

You should.
She would be a good presence for you right now

Perhaps she can help with your peace of mind.

And you benefactor would probably provide, if you asked

The thought of having Istie visit her at Skyhold lingers for the next two days. She could give Isie her room and take the couch. Hell, she could probably sleep in Josephine’s room.

There are so many things Istie could have that aren’t in the Dales. She could take Istie to a movie theater. Or a pizza buffet. Or a shopping mall. She could introduce her to Varric and Dorian and Iron Bull. He would be the first Qunari Istie would have ever met.

The more she thinks about, the more she can’t stop thinking about it.

To: fen_harel@mail.com

from: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subj: A favor

So I know I ask a lot of favors from you, but this one isn’t so bad. I was thinking that since I’m at Skyhold this whole summer, I could fly my Keeper up for a visit. I’ve got a two week break in between classes and I haven’t seen her since I went back to the Dales and I miss her. I have enough of my savings for a one way ticket. Could you pay for the return ticket and take it out of my allowance?

If not, I get it. I can borrow the money from Varric, probably.

BTW summer classes are sucking the life out of me. I mean, in a good way? Kind of? Like, I don’t regret it, but fucking Creators, it’s exhausting in a way that normal classes are not. Three hours is way too long to listen to someone lecture. I can’t even sit for three hours for one of Krem’s fantasy movies.

I met another friend of Varric’s. His name is Fenris and he’s actually a caseworker for Zevran. He’s easily the grumpiest elf I’ve ever met and he’s got the weirdest tattoos. They’re not Valaslin, but they definitely have a ritual look to them. But when I asked, his glare could have murdered me.

He turned out not to be so bad, especially when he taught me a move to use in close combat and I finally FINALLY got to take Cassandra down on the mat in training later that week. Oh the look on her face . . . is something I will treasure for the rest of my life.

Why does Varric always attract the weirdos?

I guess that says something about me, eh?

Yours,

Ellana.
To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

from: fen_harel@tmail.com

Subj: RE: A favor

I would be more than happy to pay for your Keeper’s return ticket. You need not worry about paying me back. I know you miss her terribly and it is good for you to have more contact with other Dalish. I hope you two have a wonderful visit. Just be sure to give me at least a week’s notice before she is ready to return home.

Summer classes are often brutal. I never enjoyed them myself, but they did get me ahead in ways that I needed. I admire the fact that you are taking so many.

I also am wondering if we should start a bet to see how long you last before you crack.

Perhaps I should get into touch with this Varric, the Purveyor of Bets in your circle.

His company is certainly strange and oddly coincidental. Is everything alright with your friend that he needs his caseworker?

Yours,

Fen’Harel

Does she tell Fen’harel about the hospital visit? Absolutely the fuck not. He would lose his shit, and honestly, she’s tired of talking about it. She’s debating on even telling Istie.

Still, she feels a little guilty as she pens a quick response of thanks and with a little white lie thrown in that Fenris is visiting Varric for other reasons and it’s completely coincidental that he’s also Zevran’s . . . person.

Total coincidence. Which isn’t a lie, technically, if Ellana jumped back in time about a week to when she had no idea about their connection with each other.

Then she gets to make a much happier phone call home.

“ Ellana, you gotta relax, or you’re gonna give yourself a coronary,” says Varric.

Ellana stops her pacing by the baggage claim long enough to throw him a glare.

“I can’t relax! What are we going to do if she doesn’t show up? She doesn’t have a cell phone! She’s never been out of the Dales before. She could have gotten lost. She could have missed her flight. What if somebody fucked with her? I’d have to file a missing person’s report!”

She feels ready to tear out her hair.

Meanwhile, Varric sits on a bench, dipping a giant pretzel into a cup of mustard, without a care in the world.
“How old is this woman again?” he asks.

“She’s like... 68? Or 69. Whatever. Old enough not to be able to defend herself!”

“Old enough to figure out how to get where she’s going or ask for help,” he says patiently. “She’s not a kid.”

“I don’t think you fully understand just how different the Dales are from this place. We don’t have airports like this. Varric, we don’t have airports!”

The baggage claim dings and the conveyor belt starts moving, and Ellana immediately takes her guard position at the bottom of the stairs. Crowds of people crush their way down from their freshly landed flights, and Ellana’s gaze darts between them, looking for a specific shock of thick grey hair.

Hundreds of people squeeze past her. Ellana’s heart starts to squeeze in her chest when finally, silhouetted in the evening sun slanting in the windows, she catches sight of her Keeper at the top of the steps, chatting to some random young guy as if she had raised him.

Ellana waves her arms like a lunatic, and Istie gives her an excited wave.

“Oh, thank the Creators,” she whispers.

She has to wait until Istie bids the young man farewell, patting his back and telling him to enjoy his visit with his siblings, before she wraps her arms around Ellana.


Instantly, something deep within her relaxes.

“How was your trip? Was everything okay? Did you get overwhelmed?” Ellana asks.

Istie pulls away and brushes Ellana’s hair back. “It was fine, lethalin. There was a lovely young human that helped me find my gate, and then it was just a matter of waiting. I will admit, I am rather hungry. The price for food in these airports is outrageous, and it’s all fried.”

Ellana laughs and steps away. Varric takes this moment to sidle in between them.

“My God, Ellana, don’t tell me this enchanting creature here is your Keeper? I thought you said she was old? Hi, Varric Tethras at your service. I’m the driver.”

“I did not say she was old!” she cries, but they both ignore her. Istie laughs and shakes his head.

“Yes, hello, I know all about you. You were Ellana’s English professor.”

“For a brief, but beautiful, year, yes. I had that dubious honor.”

“It’s so good to finally meet you. I feel like I know you already. But you’re much more handsome than she described.”

“Well, it’s hard for my rugged good looks to be translated through words alone.”

Ellana rolls her eyes.

“Really?” says Istie. “From what I’ve heard, you’re very good with your words.”

“Oh, Merciful Creators,” Ellana grumbles before Varric can turn that into a flirtatious innuendo.
“I’m going to the baggage claim.”

Ellana 1:25 P.M.

help varric is asking istie for embarrassing childhood stories!

Krem 1:26 pm

so you’re saying I need to text varric

like, immediately

Ellana 1:27

I swear to gods you better not

Krem 1:56

OMG you shot a visiting keeper in the ass!?

Ellana 2:00

i’m going to kill everyone

After getting enough blackmail material to hold over Ellana’s head for the rest of her life, Varric is content to leave them be. He leaves Istie with a kiss on her knuckles like they’ve been friends for fifty years.

“ It was wonderful to finally meet you,” says Istie. “You’re every bit as charming as Ellana describes. I can’t wait to meet the rest of her friends.”

“ The pleasure was all mine,” says Varric. “You know, I own a little place in town that we all usually hang out at. You should come tomorrow night and meet everyone else.”

Ellana tries to step on his toes but he stands too far away for it to be unnoticeable.

“ I would love that,” says Istie, her eyes brightening.

“ Alright, well, Varric’s very busy and so are we,” says Ellana hastily. “Istie, the bedroom is down the hall, last door on the left. I’ll walk Varric to his car.”

She strong-arms Varric out the front door before either of them can say another word.
“We are not taking Istie to the *Hanged Man,*” Ellana hisses as they walk down the sidewalk.

“Why not? It’s the perfect place to meet everyone.”

“Cause it’s a sketchy-ass bar, and she’s my *Keeper!*”

“Maker’s balls, Ellana,” says Varric. “Let the woman relax for once and have some fun. She’s old; she’s not dead.”

“What if somebody says something to her? She’s never been around that many humans at one time. I’m not letting some drunk Dickhead ruin this trip for her.”

Varric gives her a pointed look. “Has anyone ever said anything to you?”

Ellana pauses. “. . . No. But I am also capable of kicking somebody’s ass. Istie’s a lot more fragile than me.”

Varric rolls his eyes. “Please, you really think racist assholes care or even think about the potential of people deckling them before they run their mouth? People haven’t said anything to you because I give lifetime bans to everyone who’s ever so much as given you a dirty look.”

Ellana stares down at him, rather taken aback. “ Seriously – you did that?”

“Of course I did! I’m not going to allow you to get harassed at my bar. You get enough shit as it is.”

“But . . . those were paying customers.”

“Fuck those customers. They can take their money and shove it up their own asshole. I’m rich enough that I don’t have to deal with dickheads and their prejudiced bullshit if I don’t want to.”

The rush of sudden affection for his stupid craggy face and hooked nose almost overpowers the irritation from him wheedling stories out of Istie like she was some kind of vending machine for childhood mortification.

“Then . . . we’ll be there,” she says.

*Josephine 5:46*

*I can’t believe your Keeper is down there and I’m MISSING it!*

*I’ve wanted to meet her for years!*

*Ellana 5:47*

*She’s napping right now*

*but maybe you can video call her later.*

*Josephine 5:47*
I would love that!

Krem 7:18
so what the hell are they talking about exactly?

Ellana 7:18 pm
the tapestry josephine’s got in the living room
apparently its handmade
and very fine craftsmanship

Krem 7:19
uh . . . huh

Ellana 7:19
isties been embroidering and stuff for like 50 years
so she loves seeing stuff like that
especially when its handmade
apparently its a very old heirloom?

Krem 7:21
oh great now her parents are talking about it
anyway so how are you
shoot any keepers lately?

Ellana 7:22
idk krem
looked at any wedding venues lately
Krem 7:23
shut up

Ellana 9:42
you wanna know how I am spending my evening?

Solas 9:43
Spending wonderful quality time with your Keeper?

Ellana 9:43
I guess you could say that?
Varric dragged us to the hanged man
and im watching her down her third beer
like, am I hallucinating?

Solas 9:44
As much as you have bragged about Dalish moonshine,
surely it can’t be so surprising that she can handle three beers

Ellana 9:45
I have never seen this woman drink in my LIFE
and now she’s teaching varric a dalish drinking song
who is this person?!

Solas 9:46
Your keeper is old enough to have had quite a life before you met her
You’ve never asked about it?
Ellana 9:46

not really I guess

shes so prim and proper

plus her own family died before she met me so

she doesnt like to talk about the past

but I didnt think shed be hiding some kind of barfly drinker past

she beat varric at cards!

Solas 9:48

It sounds like you and her are going to have a lot of fun

I shall leave you to it

Iron Bull sidles up next to her at the bar. “Who knew your keeper was such a babe? Did you see the way she’s been eyeing my muscles?”

“It’s a shame you’re not single,” says Ellana dryly.

His eyebrows raise up. “You think I’m kidding? If I didn’t have Dorian, you’d be saying hello to your new step-papa.”

“Oh gross .”

He grins. “You think she’s interested in pool?”

“Who knows? She’s full of surprises tonight,” says Ellana.

“I take it that this is not normal behavior for her?”

She gives him a pointed look. “If anyone back home saw Istie hustling Varric at Diamondback, they would have to pick up their jaws from the floor.”

“Maybe that’s why. Up here, she’s not a Keeper, she’s just your . . . mom-person. She doesn’t have to worry aboutshouldering anyone’s expectations. She can just relax.”

“I . . . haven’t thought of it like that,” Ellana admits.

Everyone in Wycombe looks to Istie for guidance and comfort, and they almost revere her for it. She could never walk into a bar and drink beer and play cards and still uphold that reputation people depend on her for.

“Let’s teach her pool,” she says. “I think she’ll love it.”
“Oh my gods, Istie, are you drunk?”

Her keeper leans against her shoulder as they walk towards the tram, red-cheeked and positively jolly.

“Ellana Lavellan! I have never been drunk in my entire life,” she declares, rather loudly in Ellana’s ear.

“Judging by how easily you downed those six apple ales, I think you’re lying to me.”

Istie throws her head back and laughs. “I’m Dalish! All Dalish can hold their liquor – it’s in our blood.”

“You’re not doing that great of a job right now, if I’m honest.”

“Cut me a break. It’s been a long time for me.”

*Since before you were Keeper*? Ellana wants to ask but she doesn’t.

“Did you have fun tonight?” she says instead.

Istie hums and places her head on Ellana’s shoulder. “I did. I like pool. I’ll see if Aridhel can make a table back home. And I like your friends.”

“They certainly like you. You’re lucky Iron Bull is already attached. He told me himself he’d have plans for you if he wasn’t.”

Istie grins. “Looking at those arms, I’d almost let him. Who was the other flirty one again? With the smooth voice?”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “That’s Zevran. He’s Antivan.”

“Ah. He seems very kind. And he’s probably good in bed. Have you ever considered him?”

If Ellana had a drink she would have choked on it. “Istie! Oh my gods, did you really just say that?!”

Her keeper cackles like a witch in a fairy tale. “It’s fun to see the look on your face every time I surprise you. You didn’t think I could be so good at cards, did you?”

“Nope, and neither did Varric. We could have made some serious cash if there were bets.”

“My husband taught me cards. Varric reminds me a lot of him sometimes – charming and kind and an insidious cheat.”

Ellana can feel the way Istie almost deflates, the tension dripping from her shoulders. She wraps her around tighter around her Keeper’s waist.

“You don’t talk about him a lot,” she says softly.

“No,” she admits. “It does not do well to dwell on the past. I have done my mourning, and now all I’m left with are the happy memories. Like tonight.”

A huge yawn splits open Istie’s face.

“Come on, you sassy barfly,” says Ellana. “Let’s get you into bed.”
Despite the six beers the night before, Istie still wakes with the sun. She’s rifling through Ellana’s cabinets at seven in the morning, searching for the pans with a cacophony that sends Ellana scrambling out of bed.

“Do you still like birdie in the baskets?” Istie asks.

Ellana grins, suddenly less grumpy about her rude awakening. “Yes.”

Soon the smell of sizzling buttered bread fills the kitchen. Ellana watches intently as Istie makes breakfast, trying to file it away for later. No matter how much she practiced away from home, Ellana’s own attempts can never live up to Istie’s famous birds in the basket.

“So what’s on the agenda for today?” Istie asks, sliding a perfectly browned slice of bread with an intact egg fried in the middle onto Ellana’s plate.

“We could go downtown and see the park,” Ellana offers. “There’s a really good coffee shop nearby and the bookstore we always go to, and it’s a short bus ride away from the mall.”

“Sounds wonderful! I’ve never been to a mall before.”

Their little walk in the park by the coffee shop has turned into a long, rambling excursion off the paths as Istie investigates the different plant life in higher altitudes.

She gets very excited about an ugly, twist weed that grows near a cluster of trees by the bike path.

“Felandaris!” she cries, running over to it. Her fingers ghost over the bare, twiggy-looking vine. “Serannasan Ma, Creators. What luck!”

“That’s felandaris?” Ellana says, peering down at it. “It looks like a dead bush.”

“Looks are deceiving. Ladahlen charges a fortune for the dried stuff and here it is, growing fresh for free. Hold on a minute, I’m going to snip some of this up.”

It doesn’t stop at the felandaris, either. Istie drags Ellana off the paths to investigate every bush and tree stump in the park, pulling out a pair of old gardening shears from her backpack to snip flowers off bushes and tops of mushrooms from the sides of tree trunks.

Eventually they start earning strange or dirty looks from passing joggers and Ellana knows, no matter how oblivious Istie is to them, that the strangers are making all kinds of weird, racist assumptions about her.

“Ansul maela! This is a public park, not the woods,” Ellana says. “You can’t just help yourself. You’ve done enough!”

“What are they going to do, da’len, arrest me? If you’re so paranoid, keep on the lookout.”

“I am on the lookout! We’re getting a lot of weird looks.”

“So? I don’t see any signs against it.”

Ellana groans. Of course Istie isn’t self-conscious – she’s never been any place where she stuck out, where people considered her an outsider. Ellana had to learn a certain level of vigilant self-awareness
fast in the human world, and Istie’s level of obliviousness is startling in comparison.

“Beautiful,” says Istie, carefully wrapping the pieces in tissues and depositing them in her leather satchel. “I wonder what’s in those groves of trees in the corner?”

Ellana jumps in front of her before Istie can take off. “No. No more. Look, there’s a hiking trail I go to sometimes. In a real park, in the middle of nowhere. We’ll go later, and you can have a field day. I’ll even carry it. Just please, for the love of the Creators, stop harvesting all the plants in this very public park in the middle of the city.”

Istie gives her a long look, and there’s that specific twinkle in the corner of her eyes she gets when she knows she’s pestering the shit out of Ellana and she thinks it’s funny – usually to teach Ellana some kind of lesson.

“Are you finally getting embarrassed by your old Keeper?” she asks.

Ellana rolls her eyes. “Oh please, like you haven’t spent my entire life embarrassing me in one way or another – like the entire car ride back from the airport for starters!”

“I had to make sure you weren’t trying to hide from your roots so far from home.”

“My roots aren’t just shooting Keeper Zathurin in the ass!”

“You know I love to tell that story.”

“Yeah. I know. And now all of Thedas is going to know because there’s no way Varric isn’t going to stick that in a novel somewhere.”

“It was an excellent shot, and you were so young. You should be proud.”

Istie is grinning at her in a way that makes it impossible to stay mad or even slightly irritated. Ellana sighs.

“You want to try out the coffee shop? It’s not that far of a walk, and they have pretty good tea. Not as good as yours, but it works.”

“That sounds excellent.”

She takes Ellana’s elbow and allows herself to be guided back to one of the walking paths. There is dirt smudged underneath her fingernails, but Ellana says nothing about it.

“Well, well, well. Fancy meeting you here.”

Of all the people to run into at the park at nine AM on the weekend, Dorian is the last person she expected. He and his father are walking down the same path, heading in the opposite direction.

“Dorian! You’re up before noon on a Saturday? What’s the emergency?”

Dorian gives her a flat look. “A man can’t enjoy the sunshine on a glorious morning without there being an emergency?”

“Not unless he just hasn’t gone to sleep yet,” she says.

Dorian’s father gives a little cough, and Dorian rolls his eyes.
“Forgive me, I haven’t made introductions just yet,” he says. “Father, this is Ellana’s Keeper, Istiemaethoriel. She’s traveled all the way from the Dales. And this my father, Halward Pavus.”

Dorian’s father bows slightly at them. “Good morning, Serah Ellana. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Keeper.”

“Please, call me Istie. Ellana was about to show me this coffee shop she’s told me so much about. Would you like to join us?”

“Nothing would please me more,” says Mr. Pavus. “But I am not in the best health. I’m afraid the walk there would quite do me in.”

“Well, that’s what the young people are for,” says Istie. “Da’len, why don’t you and Dorian take our drink orders and bring them back to the park? It’s a crime against the Creators to drink inside on a morning like this, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Pavus?”

Dorian’s father hesitates, and Ellana tenses. She catches Dorian’s gaze for a brief moment. There are two ways an unsupervised interaction between Ellana’s very Dalish Keeper and Dorian’s old, traditional and probably super racist Tevinter father would go, and one of them would end in a throat punching.

“That sounds amenable, thank you,” he says finally.

Istie beams, and Ellana can see Mr. Pavus’s shoulders relax just a little.

“Wonderful. There’s a bench just other there. Da’len, just get me whatever you’re having.”

Istie takes Mr. Pavus’s arm before anyone can say another word and guides him to the bench some twenty feet behind him as if they’d known each other for fifty years.

“Well, I suppose that settles it,” says Dorian, blinking.

“Come on, we should hurry.” Ellana sets off to one of the exits. Dorian falls into step beside her. “So on a scale of one to ten, how racist is your father?”

“To be perfectly honest, I have no idea,” says Dorian as they pass the gate. “He’s changed so much since his diagnosis. Impending death has offered him quite a stark perspective.”

“Huh.”

“I will say this: no matter how sweetly insisting your keeper may be, my father is just as stubborn. He would not have been led to that bench if he didn’t already want to go. By the way, is she calling you darling? How precious.”

“It’s da’len, actually,” says Ellana, squirming a little bit. “It’s means, like, little one. It’s a nickname for a child, but she calls everyone younger than her da’len. She says it’s out of affection, but I think it’s to assert her authority.”

“I think that’s the purpose of all childhood nicknames.”

Ellana orders two embrium teas with a splash of milk and cinnamon on top. Dorian orders two coffee espressos, black as night. By the time they make it back to the park, Istie and Mr. Pavus don’t look as if they want to kill each other. In fact, Istie is showing him her herb collection from her purse.
“Oh, merciful Creators,” Ellana mutters, picking up her stride, but Dorian stops her.

“Hold on. I think he’s . . . enjoying it?”

They duck behind a thick oak tree and peer down the path at their respective parental figures.

“Arbor’s blessing is actually wonderful for sleep when you mix it with some rashvine nettle. I used to give it to Ellana when she had nightmares. But I find that the vines that grow in higher altitudes are more potent.”

“Fascinating. I had no idea that herbs would be as effective as medication.”

“Herbs are medication, Mr. Pavus. That’s where modern medicine comes from. Of course, humans had to ruin it with chemicals – no offense meant.”

“None taken. And please, call me Halward. A few years ago I might have scoffed at what you just said, but after these last few months, I think I might agree with you.”

“Holy shit,” Ellana whispers.

“I almost don’t want to interrupt,” says Dorian.

Of course, that’s when Istie looks up and waves at the two of them, so Ellana and Dorian have no choice but to slunk out from behind the tree as if they weren’t eavesdropping.

Once Istie and Mr. Pavus have their drinks, they are perfectly content to sip them unhurriedly on the park bench, while Istie points out various birds and tells him all about the ones that frequent her garden.

“I’ll have so many that settle in the trees and bushes during the fall that you almost can’t carry on a conversation in the living room, they’re so loud. But they are fun to watch. Sometimes I name them, certain ones that have the most personality.”

“You know, we had a grackle that made a nest on the window of my office,” says Mr. Pavus. “I almost had it cleared out, but I kept it instead and fed it seed and nuts. It came back every spring for years.”

“I didn’t know that,” says Dorian.

“It was . . . after you had left.”

“Animals remember kindness,” says Istie. “Birds especially can have a long memory, I’ve found. Crows in particular.”

The conversation carries on much the same way until they have both drained their cups. Dorian and Ellana chimed in on occasion, but mostly the conversation stayed between Mr. Pavus and her Keeper. It was almost as if Dorian and Ellana were gate-crashing some previous engagement, awkwardly butting in where they weren’t invited.

Eventually Dorian’s father needs to go home and sleep, his illness having robbed him of most of his stamina. He claps Istie’s hand before they go.

“Thank you for such a pleasant morning,” he says. “It’s been a long time since I had such wonderful conversation.”

“Thanks,” says Dorian dryly, but his father pays him no mind.
“It was my pleasure,” says Istie. “I hope we speak again soon.”

“Yes, as do I.”

Dorian gives her a speculative look over his father’s head before they part.

She and Istie continue on to the downtown shops.

“So that was weird,” she says.

“Ellana, I’m telling you, the park being public property means that no one owns those plants I harvest.”

“Stole, you mean, and that’s not what I was talking about. You do know Dorian’s father is from Tevinter, right?”

“And?”

“And I just didn’t expect my Dalish Keeper to get on with him like an aravel on fire, that’s all.”

“He was nothing but a perfect gentleman. He’s given Dorian some wonderful manners.”

“Well, according to Dorian, he was a complete dickhead before his diagnosis.”

“His what?”

Ellana pauses. Did Dorian want this to be a secret? Ooops.

“Ellana, what is wrong with Halward?”

“He’s . . . got terminal cancer,” says Ellana. “The doctors give him about another four to five months, if he’s lucky.”

Istie stops on the sidewalk and presses the knuckle of her thumb to her forehead and then to her chest three times, a quick prayer to Falon’din.

“Oh sweet Mythal, that’s horrible,” she murmurs. “I could sense that something had shifted deep within his spirit. I didn’t know it was that tragic. Please, say no more. If he wants me to know, he will tell me himself.”

Despite the bad news, Istie recovers back to her earlier high spirits when Ellana takes her to the mall. She takes in all the displays of excess and cheap trends that humans are so obsessed with and laughs. Ellana takes her to some of the stranger specialty stores, like the one that sells exclusively calendars and board games. She offers to buy Istie anything she likes, but of course her Keeper doesn’t want anything except the free samples passed out at the food court.

“Seriously, you don’t want anything? Nothing in this entire place?” Ellana asks as Istie plucks a teriyaki kabab out of the serving man’s hand.

“Da’len, I have no use for mass produced garbage meant to entertain you in the moment. My house is cluttered enough as it is.”

“Not even a souvenir?”

“My memories are my souvenir. They have put something in this chicken,” she says, taking another bite. “A drug or a spell of some sort. On second thought, I shall have a plate of this.”
Ellana heads for the line that has queued up behind the guy with the free sample tray. “Sera has tried to hack this place before to find the recipe, but everything says it’s just plain teriyaki.”

“That’s what they want you to think.” Istie gives her a conspiratorial smile.

When Ellana pays for the meal, she tucks the receipt in her wallet. Istie might rely on her memories, but Ellana wants something more tangible to remember this day.

Istie has another culinary adventure when they order pizza that night. They sit in the living room on the floor, something Istie would have never allowed in her house in a hundred years and yet happily complies with here, the TV playing old episodes of the Great Orlesian Bake-Off. Ellana rapidly realizes she probably should have ordered two from the way her Keeper is devouring it.

“We’ve got to find a way to make this in the Dales,” Istie says, holding up her sixth slice. “It can’t be that hard. Cheese and tomatoes and bread – how did we not think of this?”

“I know, right? The humans were good for something at least.”

“True. They are certainly good for you.”

Ellana pauses. “What is that supposed to mean?” she asks, an unpleasant feeling swooping in her gut.

Istie folds her pizza down the middle like a sandwich. “Nothing, ghilan. Just that despite your previous hardships, you seem very happy here.”

“I haven’t forgotten my roots, Istie.”

“I didn’t say you did.” She finally looks up at Ellana. “I know I teased you about it. But there’s nothing wrong with being happy here, Ellana. I’m proud of how well you have adapted to make this life work for you. And you have wonderful friends who care about you exactly as you are. It’s a good thing.”

She reaches over and squeezes Ellana’s hand before returning her attention to her dinner.

To: fen_harel@mail.com
from: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu
Subj: Istie’s Mountain Adventure

Dear Fen’Harel

Today I took Istie out hiking at the Skyhold National Forest. It was obvious even to me how she almost instantly relaxed once we were surrounded by trees. I know she’s had a lot of fun the past few days – she even went to Varric’s bar and got trashed and played pool and cards! But I always feel a part of me is missing if I’m not around nature and the manicured lawns of Skyhold don’t really count.

Of course, she immediately takes us off the path and starts climbing uphill, searching for mushrooms. Apparently before she flew up here, she had done all kinds of research about medicinal plants native to this region she can’t get in the Dales and she was on a Mission. She dragged me all over that freaking forest and my backpack was stuffed by the time we had to go home.
And then she roped me into emptying out all my plastic snack bags to sort all the herbs she picked. I’ll be dumping dirt out of my backpack for weeks.

But she’s very happy and I can’t really deny her anything after all she’s done for me. Right now she’s humming and hanging up leaves to dry above the stove.

Thank you for helping me get her up here. It’s done the both of us a lot of good, I think.

Your friend,

Ellana

Dorian 2:34 PM

My father is asking to have breakfast with you and your Keeper again

Thoughts?

Dorian 4:40 PM

Hello?

Are you still alive?

Ellana 5:36

sorry

we were are the skyhold national forest

no service

istie says yes shes got some herbal tea shit for your dad

Dorian 5:39

Thank the maker

I was about to call the police

Father wants to know if 7:30 AM is good for her

Ellana 5:40

she wakes up at like five so yeah
Dorian and his father are already there by the time she and Istie make it down, occupying the park bench where they last visited. Mr. Pavus stands up, rather stiffly, to greet them, bowing and shaking their hands. Istie accepts his handshake with a smile and then wraps her arms in a Keeper Hug, which definitely throws him off a bit by the way his arms hesitantly pat her back. But he doesn’t seem displeased, either.

Maybe he’s just unused to affection, which is a sad thought in and of itself. House Pavus is probably not a hugging house.

“Good morning, Keeper,” says Mr. Pavus as he sits back down. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“This is breakfast with friends, Father, not a business lunch,” says Dorian with a wide yawn. “You don’t have to thank them.”

“I do if I have manners, Dorian,” says his father stiffly.

“On dhea, Halward,” says Istie, taking the seat next to him. “I brought some of that homemade tea I was telling you about last time. Actually, I brought several, depending on your needs.”

She pulls out four little snack bags containing crushed herbs and powdered roots of some of the plants they had picked in the forest just yesterday. On each bag are the ingredients and their uses written in her careful hand with permanent marker.

Ellana tries not to wince at how . . . provincial it must look to someone of Mr. Pavus’s station in life, especially if he doesn’t know how long Istie took to prepare them, but he accepts the bags with careful reverence.

“That is most kind of you, Keeper. I am eager to try them. Please, allow me to treat you to breakfast. Dorian?”

Dorian sighs and another yawn splits his face. “The only place open is the bakery,” he says. “I hope you like bread.”

“I love bread,” says Istie. “Da’len, why don’t you accompany him? You know what I like.”

Ellana knows a pointed request when she hears one.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” she says, tugging Dorian’s arm. “Let’s get you some coffee.”

“The bakery’s coffee is subpar,” Dorian whines, but he lets Ellana drag him off down the path to the exit.

“I hope he appreciates this,” he mutters. “Seven in the morning is practically the middle of the night!”

“Gods, you are such a crybaby in the morning.”

“It’s a Sunday! I’m at least five hours ahead of my usual schedule, all so my father can have a playdate!”
They return shortly with the breakfast order, Dorian sipping his subpar coffee with a scowl, to find Istie and Halward standing by the trunk of a nearby tree, staring up into the canopy.

“What are you doing?” Ellana asks as they approach.

Istie shushes them. “There’s a bird nest up here. Swallows I think.”

“They have hatchlings,” Mr. Pavus adds quietly.

Dorian looks over at Ellana, eyebrows rising. “You hear that, Ellana? Hatchlings!”

Istie and Mr. Pavus shush them simultaneously.

“We’ll just . . . put this here and . . . walk around the park,” Ellana whispers, pulling out her bagel and setting the bag with the rest of them on the ground by Istie’s feet. “Come on, Dorian.”

“What? I don’t want to walk, I want to sit—”

Ellana yanks his arm and drags him away. “Come on, Dorian.”

They head down one of the paths, Dorian looking over his shoulder at his father every few steps. “So one a scale of one to ten, how likely is it that we will become step siblings before my father dies?”

She laughs. “I wouldn’t take it that way. People have always flocked to her like that.”

“Because she’s stunning?” Dorian asks pointedly.

“Because she’s soothing. Istie has an innate sense about . . . what people need, and part of her job as Keeper is to find that need and fill it somehow through herself or someone in the community.”

“Are you going to take her place once she . . . passes on?”

“Fucking Creators, no!” Ellana has to laugh at that.

“Why not? Has she not been training you for that kind of thing? You’re practically her daughter.”

“Well, it’s not an inherited position, first of all,” says Ellana. “But I’m not good at the things Keepers need to be good at, and Istie saw that a long, long time ago.”

“And what sorts of things do Keepers need to be good at?”

“Staying in the Dales, for starters,” Ellana says, and Dorian snorts. “But they are the glue that holds the clan together, you know? They can’t get involved in all our drama and infighting, or pick sides. They should be calm and dependable. They should be ready to drop what they are doing to mediate or help someone if there’s an emergency. They lead all our holidays. It’s a lot of responsibility. And I’m too hot-headed and opinionated, and I’m not good at . . . being needed. I like my space.”

“I certainly understand that last part,” sighs Dorian. “Caring for my father . . . while I volunteered and want to do so, I have to admit that the round-the-clock awareness of his needs is exhausting. And yet I’m terrified of the day when I no longer need to.”

Ellana pats his shoulder. “I have to admit, I was surprised that he came to stay with you permanently.”
“So was I. The Magisterium must be in an uproar to have the patriarch of House Pavus move out of Tevinter. Such a thing has never happened before. But my father decided that if I were to ever accept him back, making up for so much lost time was... more important than whatever business he left behind.”

Dorian looks away, his adam’s apple bobbing with a thick swallow. Ellana gives him space and quiet to sort his thoughts, a Keeper thing that Istie did successfully teach her. Unfortunately it leaves her mind with no distraction from the one thought she was trying to avoid.

The real reason why she can’t be Keeper is that the Keeper isn’t supposed to be despised by 90% of the clan. And if she were to ever change her mind and settle down back home, that rift might never be repaired, even if fifty years were to pass.

Leaving to explore the world and get her education felt like pressing pause on a movie – she had no idea it was more like taking a hammer to the television.

It was not a goodbye she had prepared for.

“I suppose, if one had the willpower and healthy sleep pattern to get out of bed so early, this time of day is... lovely. In its own way,” says Dorian, breaking the silence.

Ellana smiles. “You really should try it more.”

“I think I have no choice. My father wakes up before the sun every morning. It’s disgusting.”

When they come back around, Mr. Pavus is sitting on the bench, his head cradled in his hands and Istie rubbing small circles on his back. Dorian jerks beside her, but she holds her arm out.

“Is my father... crying,” he demands.

“Istie has a way of getting out what people bury deep down in themselves,” says Ellana. “I think we should probably take another lap.”

Dorian stands rooted to the spot for a moment. “You know, your Keeper is showing more tenderness in this moment than my mother did their entire marriage.”

Ellana turns to look at him. “Does your mother know he’s here?”

“My mother died years ago. And good riddance,” mutters Dorian. “Tell me, how many children is your Keeper allowed to adopt? And do they have to be Dalish?”

Ellana grins. “How do you feel about agonizingly painful facial tattoos?”

Eventually Ellana and Dorian – after three laps around the park – are able to finish their breakfast with their respective parental figures. Slowly, by degrees, Dorian’s father relaxes the tension of his formality and they leave with him finally calling Istie by her first name.

“We saw him crying,” says Ellana once they are in the privacy of the apartment. “What happened?”

Istie gives her a very familiar, pointed look.

“Oh, come on,” Ellana says. “You won’t say anything? He’s not even Dalish!”

“It was told in confidence, da’len. You know my policy on that, Dalish or not. We’ll just say that
there are still some conversations he needs to have with his son.”

“Are you going to tell Dorian? You know feelings-talk is not really standard where they come from.”

“And what do I always say about that sort of thing?” Istie says in a sing-song voice.

Ellana rolls her eyes. “We are not mouth pieces, Ellana,” she repeats, a phrase she has heard over and over and over.

“Exactly. People may speak privately with me, and I may offer advice in return, but they must initiate their own confrontations and conversations. Being the middleman between two people who should speak to each other never ends well. You know that.”

“What if it never happens? What if two people are just stubborn morons, and if we just told them what they can’t admit to each other, they would be able to fix their problem?”

Istie gives her another look, one of slight concern. “It’s a noble thought, but if two people can’t have an important conversation with someone they love, they have an entirely different problem that needs worked out first. There’s a difference between stubbornness and an inability to perform the basics of a relationship of any kind.”

“How do you stand it, knowing all the dark things about people and never being able to tell anyone else?”

“I do tell someone else,” says Istie. “I tell Mythal, every time I pray. And I tell myself, in my journal. You know, the kind I tried for years to get you to start?”

Ellana rolls her eyes. “Yes, I know.”

“Writing is an excellent way to purge and examine our thoughts and feelings so they no longer affect us.”

“Yes, Istie. I know.”

Istie just gives her another pointed look but lets the matter drop. Ellana knows the advice is sound, and it’s not like she didn’t try in high school to journal her feelings. But talking to herself felt pointless and kind of pathetic – yelling into the void and knowing that no one was on the other side listening still meant that she struggled alone.

She needs the presence of another person – and Mythal doesn’t count, though she would never voice this aloud. Even if Ellana did believe in the presence of the Creators, her petty concerns would probably be considered a waste of their time.

That’s probably why she sent so many long, rambling, panicked emails to Fen’Harel her first year. Even when he didn’t respond to her, just the fact that someone else out there knew her struggles comforted her.

But she has needed him less and less with each year, something she hadn’t realized until now. Though he lifted that requirement off of her after shipping her to the Emerald Graves, Ellana still feels a flush of guilt. She almost never emails him now, unless she wants something from him. How is that any different than some kind of trust fund baby whining to daddy when she wants his credit card and then ignoring him?
To: fen_harel@tmail.com

From: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subj: thank you

Dear Fen’harel,

So I kind of had this realization today that I only really email you when I want something and I hate that about myself. You have done so much for me, more than I could ever repay, and I’m not just talking about the money you’ve spent on me. You’ve also listened to me without judgement, you’ve offered me advice and encouragement when I needed it, and you made sure that I never had to feel alone in a new place.

I will always be grateful for that, no matter what else happens.

And I’m sorry that I’ve neglected you. I know you said I didn’t have to write you anymore, but you’re my friend, and I’ve made mistakes in the past with ignoring my friends because life got hectic. No matter what I’ve got going on here, it doesn’t mean that I can’t make time for you. So I’m going to try to do better with that.

Thanks for always sticking by me.

Your friend,

Ellana

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To: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

From: fen_harel@tmail.com

Re: thank you

Ellana,

You have nothing to feel guilty over. I have been very happy to watch your transformation from an anxious, lonely freshman to a confident, happy senior surrounded by many friends. Even if that means you don’t quite need me as much as you used to. I have never doubted your friendship and I remain grateful to have experienced it at all.

I had asked for updates on your school life and you gave me so much more by sharing your vulnerabilities and personal thoughts with me. You have given me perspectives I never considered and an enrichment my life was lacking, so really it is I that is in your debt.

Yours faithfully,

Fen’Harel

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For the rest of the week, Ellana savors each moment with Istie – and there is never a dull moment. She and Zevran take Istie out dancing, Iron Bull teams up with Istie for a pool competition at the Hanged Man. They watch a silly rom-com at the movie theater, sitting in the back and giggling over human courtship fails. Istie shows Ellana how to cook some of the Dalish meals she misses so much.
Varric teaches her Wicked Grace, and she teaches him Andruil’s Arrow.

But the last night of her stay comes at breakneck speed, and despite all the adventure they had, it finds them both on the couch in their sleep clothes and embroidering.

“Why did I use to hate this so much?” Ellana asks, carefully threading rich green floss through her needle.

“Because you had to be still for it,” says Istie, the corner of her mouth twitching.

“Well, I was an idiot. This is like making art without having to know how to draw, which we both know I’m terrible at.”

“That is true, ghilan. Here, let me show you a feather stitch – I love to use them for vines, it gives a nice texture.”

Ellana pays careful attention as Istie shows her the next kind of stitch. They had started out watching more Orlesian Bake-Off, which had been playing in the background while Istie embroidered. But Ellana had found her gaze sliding more and more to the beautiful forest scene that was slowly blooming onto the cloth in Istie’s hand until she broke down and asked to learn (or re-learn) how to stitch again.

Once satisfied with Ellana’s progress on four different types of stitches, Istie pulls a spare piece of cloth from her crafting bag and sketches a simple flower and vine design on it in light pencil.

“If you master those, you can easily recreate them on your clothing,” she says.

Ellana happily gets started. There is something soothing about the work that she never could appreciate as a kid. But that peace is really just a bonus. Ellana will never be Keeper, and she will probably never be able to use or pass on the various skills Istie had tried to teach her through the years.

But this . . . this is a part of Istie that she can keep for herself.

Ellana becomes so absorbed in her task that she barely notices the TV. They power through three more episodes before Istie yawns and cuts it off.

“It’s nearly eleven, Elanna,” she says gently.

Ellana’s head pops up. “Already? Look, I’ve finished.”

Istie inspects her progress, running a finger carefully up and down the stitches. Some of them are a little crooked, but overall Ellana’s pleased with it. It feels like a triumph over her younger self.

“This is excellent, Ellana. I’m keeping it.”

“What? No! I need that to put it on clothes!”

Ellana reaches over to swipe it back, but Istie folds it in half and stashes it in her bag faster than should be elvenly possible.

“It’s your first finished embroidered piece. I’m going to have it framed. I can’t believe it took nearly twenty-five years.”

“Fine,” says Ellana, sighing and fighting off a smile. “You can put it on the fridge or something.”
“I’ll send you more designs, if you’re really that interested.”

“I am interested. Seriously.”

Istie looks quite pleased with herself. “Words I have longed to hear for an age. Now I think it should be off to bed for both of us.”

Ellana’s throat suddenly goes tight. “Not yet. It’s not even eleven!”

“Ghilan, I have an early flight tomorrow. And you said we should be there at least two hours before.”

“What’s one night of sleep in the grand scheme of things?”

“Maybe not much for you. But I’m old. I need my sleep.”

Ellana sighs, fighting the sudden urge to cry. “Alright. On nydah, Istie.”

But Istie doesn’t get up immediately. She looks over at Ellana, almost as if trying to memorize her face, before she scoots closer.

“Sit on the floor, da’len. Let me braid your hair first.”

Ellana happily scoots down to the carpet in between Istie’s legs. Istie tugs the hair elastic from Ellana’s ponytail and slowly cards her fingers through the knots. Soon she’s humming an old Dalish song, pieced together from even more ancient fragments, and Ellana closes her eyes.

It’s a ritual that happened almost every night in her youth. Spending all day tearing through the woods, Ellana’s hair would become a tangled nest by the end of the day, and sleeping in it created a mess so thick Istie had to cut it out once. So after that, she made it a habit to comb and braid Ellana’s hair before bed until Ellana was old enough to do it herself.

Tears prick her eyes at the memory of it and the way Istie’s voice sounds warmly above her. One day Ellana will lose Istie just as Dorian is losing his father now, and that day seems terrifyingly close.

Even though Ellana’s hair is not as long as it used to be and it’s not very tangled, Istie takes her time. When she finally wraps the elastic around the end of the braid, Ellana feels soothed enough to go to bed.

“Ar lath ma,” Istie says, placing a kiss on top of Ellana’s head.

“Ar lath ma,” Ellana whispers.

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To: fen_harel@mail.com

from: e_lavellan@skyholdu.edu

Subj: ughh

Dear Fen’harel,

Istie’s been gone a week and everything is depressing. Spending so much time apart made me forget how much I missed her and it’s hit me even harder, now that I remember. I don’t know who is sadder, though, me, or Dorian’s father. He gave me a beautifully handwritten letter, sealed with a
real wax seal, to mail to Istie. He wanted to deliver her flowers, but I told him that he wouldn’t find someone who could reach her in the Dales. And that her garden is big enough to probably run her own flower delivery business.

The thought of it is sweet, though. I hope they continue talking through letters. Istie loves having pen pals.

At least Jospehine and Krem will get back tomorrow and this house won’t feel so empty. And my next round of classes start next week and then the week after they’re over, senior year begins!

How does time fly so fast? How do you make it stop?

Your friend,

Ellana

Josephine 11:56 AM

T minus two hours before we see each other!

Josephine 12:57 PM

T minus one hour before we see each other!

Josephine 1:34

T minus almost a half hour before I see you!

Josephine 1:45

We just landed

T-minus ten minutes before I see you!

Josephine 2:13

I SEE YOU!!!!!!

The week before the fall semester begins, Ellana starts waking up at three in the morning from stress nightmares, something she hasn’t had since her freshman year. This time, instead of failing all her tests, she walks into her first classroom only to find out that the schedule screwed up and she was never officially signed up for her classes. And of course there’s no room to add her in at the last minute, so her entire senior year is wasted doing whatever bullshit classes that are left.

It’s a stupid dream stemming from pure insane paranoia because Ellana and Dorian planned out the
whole fall semester when she was picking out her summer courses. But there’s a little voice in the back of her head that whispers what if.

What if Dorian got so caught up with his father that he forgot to schedule them officially?

What if Dorian did schedule them, but the system got some kind of an error and dropped her?

What if her summer courses somehow got confused with her fall courses so she has to repeat the same classes?

After four nights, Ellana’s had enough. She heads over to Dorian’s office, even though he starts sabbatical next week, just to double-check everything. The offices are buzzing with activity as professors get ready for classes next week, which generally means fighting over the copiers and stealing copies of anthologies from each other’s offices.

Ellana takes the stairs to Dorian’s third floor office because the elevator is taking forever. The moment she steps through the door and into the hallway, the elevator beside her dings, doors opening to reveal Dorian himself walking slowly backwards, carrying one half of a very large desk.

He’s too busy yelling at the guy still in the elevator to notice her.

“What hurry up, you bald bastard, or I’m going to drop it!”

“Dorian?” Ellana asks, stepping toward him. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Risking my manicure so this idiot can have an office,” he says through clenched teeth. “Be a lamb and make sure the office at the end of the hall is open, would you?”

Ellana nods and squeezes past him, hurrying down to the end of the hallway. The door to her left is locked tight, but the one on her right is cracked. Ellana pushes it open to reveal a room devoid of everything but one sad, half-dead plant in the corner, and a broken bookshelf.

She hears more grunting close by, so she backs herself up to the further wall to allow them room. Dorian comes in first, his normally perfectly coiffed forelock flopping onto his sweaty head. The rest of the desk follows and then –

Ellana gapes.

“Solas?”

“Right here is fine,” says Solas, carefully setting his end of the desk down onto the floor. “I’ll move it later. Hello, Ellana.”

“What are you doing here?” she demands.

“I work here,” he replies.

“He’s finally getting his lazy ass off sabbatical,” says Dorian, leaning against the desk and blotting his forehead with an embroidered handkerchief, because of course he has one. “And he’s just shocked that his office was commandeered without his permission during his absence.”

“It’s only been four years. Oghren has been in and out of rehab for the last decade, but nobody touches his office.”

“That’s because the booze smell has soaked into the carpet and nobody wants it.” Dorian sighs and stands up. “I’m getting a shower and something to eat. You can find someone else to haul your book
boxes. Like that upstanding elvhen citizen right there.”

“Thank you for your help, Dorian,” says Solas.

Dorian flaps a hand at him as he walks out of the office.

“This is the first time I’ve seen him sweaty,” says Ellana. “He must be really pissed off.”

Solas smiles. “I could not ask for more proof of his friendship than his willingness to muss his hair for me.”

Ellana hops up on the desk. “You’re seriously quitting the Emerald Graves site?”

Solas leans against the desk beside her, using the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Ellana sneaks a glance at the flash of his lean stomach and quickly looks away.

Something beats loud in her chest.

“Well, the site is mostly finished by now. I have quite a lot of material to plan the rough draft of a new book, which I can do here. And I’m no spring chicken, as you love to remind me. That kind of work gets exhausting after four years.”

“I guess it’s time for grandpa to retire,” she jokes weakly.

“Or, at the very least, take a break.”

“Well, it will certainly be weird having you around here.”

His eyebrows raise up and Ellana flushes.

“Not like a bad weird,” she adds hastily. “Just, you know, I don’t associate this place with you. Now you’ll be at my coffee shop and in the cafeteria and passing me in the hallways. It’s like two worlds colliding, like when you showed up at the museum.”

“We will certainly see a lot of each other,” he says. “Just don’t break my nose this time.”

“Don’t get in the way of frisbee tag, then,” she counters.

He smiles at her again and something definitely flips over in her stomach. In fact, Ellana feels weirdly shaky and restless, her heart thudding, as if her body’s channeling a current of electricity.

She hasn’t felt this way in a long, long time, but she does know the feeling. And the realization of it makes her jump off the desk.

“Text me if you want help with those books,” she says, heading towards the door. “I gotta track Dorian down. I forgot to ask him something. I’ll see you around, Solas.”

“Sule tael tasalal,” he says and that swooping feeling hits her again as she leaves.

She power walks down the hallway, struggling against the urge to run. Her heart thuds heavily in her chest. Her cheeks are hot.

Merciful motherfucking Creators.

Ellana has a godsdamn crush.
Chapter End Notes

Elvhen Translation via The Elvhen Lexicon by fenxshiral!

ghilan -- "little monster", Ellana's childhood nickname

Aneth anara -- informal greeting, "my place is safe"

Serannasan ma -- "I thank you" very formal

Ansul Meala -- "but graaanndddmaaaa!"

On dhea -- "good morning"

Sule tael tasalal -- "until we meet again" informal farewell

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