Confessions of a Kirkwall Barmaid

by RangerGiselle

Summary

Meet Norah:
You probably don’t know my name, but I’m Norah and I work at the Hanged Man in the Lowtown District. I may wait tables, but I’m not an ordinary barmaid. I have ways of collecting secrets and have plenty of connections in Kirkwall’s seedy underbelly. I came to Kirkwall with a plan, but what will happen when my own past starts coming to light? Will I get the revenge my heart desires or get swept up by the winds of change around me?

Description:
Set in Kirkwall around the events of DA2. Hawke (female rogue) exists, and affects the story, but is not often featured. Most of the events happen between Norah, Hawke’s companions, and other NPCs in between Hawke’s canon scenes.

Notes

This work is complete now, as part one in a series.

I want to thank my wonderfully picky beta ElyssaCousland. Without her, my punctuation would be a lost cause. Really wanted to say "lost clause" there, but I'll refrain. Puns are
terrible *grin*
Chapter 1: A Seedy Den of Secrets

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Intro:

You already know my name. You've probably heard it a dozen times, but I'm sure you don't remember. That's okay, it's not really your fault. Someone I knew once said that blending in and being quickly forgotten are just as good as being invisible. Nobody looks twice at the serving girl who brings them their drinks, and they never suspect her of being more than she appears. That suits my current purposes just fine. I'm Norah, and I wait tables at the Hanged Man in Kirkwall's Lowtown District.

Blending in here means I have to wear a gaudy “uniform”. The low-cut blouse in particular is not anything I would have chosen, but it goes with the territory, I suppose. Each day, I tone down my appearance with cosmetics, attempting to be passably average. My sharp tongue and cold demeanor usually keep away any would-be pursuers, but there are a few that see it as a challenge. With enough practice, however, anyone can learn how to dodge the grabby hands and turn down advances with style.
During the day, the only patrons in the bar are those who rent the back rooms and a few locals with enough coin to keep them drunk. It's only when night falls that things really happen at the Hanged Man. If you have a vice, you'll find it here. Cards, drinks, a quick tumble, a good fight, and a few...less savory things. We serve all kinds here, but that's known all over Kirkwall.

Patrons are often on their worst behavior, which makes it a perfect place for their secrets to slip out. That's exactly why I'm here. I swoop in and gather up those little jewels when the opportunity arises. To the right person, they're priceless, and I happen to know plenty of the “right people”. Invisibility has its perks.

* * *

I notice the day is getting late, with the orange glow of the evening sun creeping under the door. I bring yet another pint of ale to the man near the entrance. I forget his name, but he's a regular. Corff, the bartender, catches my eye and we give each other a nod of acknowledgment. Corff loves the chaos around here; he says it makes for good gossip. His philosophy is, if you share a good rumor with the new customer, they'll buy another drink and ask for more. He gets paid and reveals only a little surface level news from around town - not a bad sales pitch, really.

You know, come to think of it, I don't think Corff ever leaves his station all day. Every time I look, he's there at the bar, chatting up the customers with his charming smile and good looks. The way he stands suggests he knows how to handle himself, and I can make out the outline of muscles under his shirt. Corff clearly has a few secrets of his own, but if they're worth it, I'll get them in time.

Still, you can't just go hawking information from a street corner. You have to be subtle, like Corff: hide your true intent behind polite smiles and stay invisible. That’s probably why the dwarf who rents the large suite, Varric, irritates me so much. He’s a different sort of player in the secrets game. He’s always talking, but finding anything useful in his elaborate stories takes all day.

I get his drinks wrong on purpose. I do it because I think it’s funny, but it's also a good excuse to come back and eavesdrop. He complains about the drinks, but keeps ordering from me anyway. I’m not sure what his real motives are. He seems the type that would do it just to aggravate me, but it never hurts to be careful.

His friends are trouble too. Well, not Isabela. Her, I like. She’s still trouble, but the good kind. I've seen the way she cheats at Wicked Grace and I bet I could learn a thing or two from her. She’s pretty in an obvious way, with her swarthy skin and confident swagger - so she lacks tact and morals, who doesn't in this joint?

I know Isabela better than Varric's other friends as she’s here at the bar more often, but I watch the others, too. The last one to visit Varric was an obvious apostate who kept yammering about mage rights. Rumor has it that he's the one who runs the clinic in Darktown. Seriously, if I can find him by just listening in on a few conversations, the templars must not even be trying.

There were two elves the other day. The young one practically screamed “easy mark”- were I so inclined- all sweet and innocent. But she's Dalish. The Dalish have a lot of secrets, sure, but none that anyone would really pay for. The other elf, however, the broody one- I heard him say something to Varric about being from Tevinter. As far as I know, elves are slaves in Tevinter, so I doubt this one got away easily. That's a far more valuable piece of information in the grand scheme of things. I'll tuck that away for later, it might come in handy for what I have planned.
Hawke is the worst of the bunch. She only arrived a little over a year ago, a refugee from Ferelden, and already people know her name. I heard Varric plans to take her on this Deep Roads expedition, swears they’ll all come back rich as kings. *Maybe then she can afford the high horse she rides around on.* There are a lot of people who would give a fortune to know Hawke’s secrets and weaknesses. To be fair, Hawke’s the reason I came to this cesspool of a city in the first place.

*Shit, speak of the devil.* Hawke walks in the door, looking like she owns the place, dragging along her usual entourage of rabble. The broody elf, the sour-faced apostate and - Maker preserve us - the guardswoman, Aveline. *Why does Hawke insist on bringing her here? It clearly makes everyone uncomfortable. Everyone gets it, you’re strong and like to boss people around. You don’t have to wear your guard armor everywhere you go. Let the people here drink in peace.* At least Aveline talks loudly enough. I don’t even have to be close to listen in on what she’s saying.

Hawke strides straight past me toward the back of the bar. Predictably, she doesn't glance once in my direction. Or Isabela's, I note. *Wait, did Isabela just look disappointed?* I assumed Hawke would head to Varric’s suite as usual, but she doesn’t. Immediately intrigued, I follow on instinct, grabbing the bin of dirty mugs as an excuse should I be spotted. A crowd has gathered around Varric's door, listening to his latest tale, and from inside I hear, “No shit, there I was...” *Good, he's just getting started; I don't need to worry about him for a while, either.* I easily slip past his door unseen behind the mass of bodies.

I suppose some might find Hawke attractive, with her shoulder-length auburn hair and green eyes, but I just find her loathsome. Despite her humble upbringings, she has a haughty attitude that conveys that all others are inferior to her, not unlike the nobility I’d known. While that may have enhanced my dislike of her, it certainly isn’t the only reason. I have a lot of reasons to hate Hawke.

I think back over what I have learned about her: I know she had been working with the smuggler Athenril for the last year and made a reputation for herself by taking on jobs that others couldn't, and she doesn't mind getting her hands dirty, but not too dirty, of course. Her name seems to be on the lips of everyone lately, but I’m not learning anything I can really use. Perhaps I'll go see Athenril, remind her of our...arrangement.

I pause my ruminations as Hawke turns the corner. I wait for a moment, and listen.

“You're always dragging me into these things,” Aveline says in a low voice that still carries easily in the short hallway. “Are you sure this is necessary, Hawke?”

“I won’t be long, just stand watch out here if you don't like it. Besides, I make your life more interesting and you know it,” teases Hawke.

Aveline gives an impatient grunt, followed by, “Just be quick about it”.

Damn it, it is clear from this conversation that I’m not going to have an easy time in spying on Hawke any further, not with her personal guard dog on the watch. Thankfully, I'm not without options. Still carrying my bin of dishes, I slip into the unoccupied room next door. After checking to make sure there is no one else inside, I close the door and sit in a chair near the far wall. The room Hawke had entered is on the other side. I whisper softly, “Cat, are you there?”

A hazy glowing figure materializes out of the shadows of the dimly-lit room. *My old friend.* I've learned that most spirits lack form, and that being brought into this world corrupts them, turning them into demons. Cat, however, looks the same as she always has. I may have changed over the years, but she hasn't. I call her "she", for that is how she appears, her image that of a young girl around age 10 or 11, the same age I had been when my magic began to manifest. Given how I grew up, I had good reasons for hiding both it and her.
“Is it time for another adventure?” she asks, eyes wide. Cat is a spirit of curiosity, and is always interested in learning new things or having new experiences. It’s no wonder that we became friends. We have a lot to offer one another.

I grin at her. “Of course! Hawke is next door and she's doing something secret. I want to know what it is.”

She smiles. She likes secrets as much as I do. “Okay, I know what to do. Don't be seen. If I'm seen, make them forget.”

“That's right; you're so good at this!”

Cat giggles and shrinks into a small form, and her glow dims until I have to strain to see her, even knowing where she is. Cat can easily slip into the smallest of spaces, and will report back what she sees and hears. She’s a perfect companion for someone like me.

After a few minutes, I hear the door open next door. Footsteps echo down the hallway, indicating Hawke is leaving, and Cat returns not long after.

“I learned some things!” she exclaims. “It was a bit boring at first, though.” She looks sad before continuing. “They were just waiting for someone. I guess they murdered some bandits and wanted to be paid for it or something. Then they started arguing, and that's when it got better. The blonde apostate has a spirit inside him! He and the elf were yelling back and forth about it. I guess the elf hates mages for some reason, he was pretty grumpy about it. I thought they were going to fight each other! But then they didn't. That was disappointing.”

“Wow,” I comment, impressed. “You really did learn a lot.”

Cat met my eyes directly, and said “They all were worried about the spirit, even the blonde guy. I don't think it was good for them to bond like that. He said it changed both of them. That won't happen to us, will it?”

“No,” I reassure her. “We won't let it. We're fine as we are, Cat. You're my dearest friend.”

“Yes, my friend who shows me new things! Let's do something more fun next time, though, okay?”

“You got it, Cat. I'll take you somewhere more interesting next time, I promise.”

She gives me a grin, and slowly becomes more and more transparent until she fades from sight completely. I know she’s gone, but will return if I called for her. Cat’s been with me since I was a child and we’ve been through a lot together.

I've learned to imitate a Kirkwall accent, but I didn't actually grow up in the Free Marches. I don't have any memories at all of my birth parents. I was raised from as early as I can remember by a wealthy aunt who couldn't have children of her own. It should have been an ideal situation - two people who needed someone to love them. But, like most people, she had her own agenda, her own secrets. She didn't take me in out of the goodness of her heart; I was just too young at the time to know any better.

Life was hard back then, and did not improve when we found out I had magic. My aunt made it clear that she was not my mother. She told me my mother abandoned me, and I believed her for a long time. The naive innocence of childhood, I think, shaking my head.

I'm so grateful for Cat. She came to me when I had nobody and was lost. I try not to rely on my friend too much, but her help can be truly invaluable. Like tonight, for example.
Spirits are vulnerable, especially outside of the Fade. Even virtuous spirits can find their purpose twisted and turn into a demon. I never want to hurt Cat like that. I mean it when I say she’s my friend. She is the only being I’ve ever been able to trust, because her nature doesn’t change. People aren’t like that at all. They will all turn on you, betray you, use you. You have to be vigilant and get the upper hand before they do.

_Hm, so Hawke's companion is an abomination?_ I may have avoided life in the Circle, but even I know that bonding yourself with a spirit usually goes very, very wrong. The sour-faced mage may be dangerous, but his clinic helps people, people who probably couldn’t afford it otherwise. Turning him into the templars is an option, but that would take him away from the good he’s doing. _I don’t much like templars, anyway. Somehow, I doubt they pay well_. I think I’ll just sit on this information for a while, and keep tabs on him. There might be a way to use this against Hawke. All secrets can have value, it’s just a matter of timing.

I haven’t learned quite the information I had hoped for, but it's something. I know Varric and Hawke are headed for the Deep Roads soon, so my true mission will have to wait if I don’t act quickly. Time to set up that meeting with Athenril. Maybe something she can offer will be the key to bringing down Hawke.
Chapter 2: The Streets of Kirkwall

Chapter Summary

Norah's meeting with Athenril doesn't quite go as planned, and she has a surprise encounter.

Chapter 2: The Streets of Kirkwall

The docks smell a lot better at night. I’m not sure why, really. Maybe the lower temperature dampens the smell of dead fish. I suspect it might be more that there are fewer unwashed bodies around, but either way, I’m glad for the reprieve. I keep to the shadows as I hurry down the street. This part of town is usually home to a few different gangs, and I’d rather not encounter them tonight. Most are just common bandits and thugs, with very little in the way of organization. Occasionally you will run into the Carta or Coterie, but I’ve had enough business with them in the past that I usually get a pass when they see me.

My trip is surprisingly easy. Maybe Hawke really had taken out some of the street-level guys. I consider the long term ramifications of that, but I suppose it’s just as well. The disorganized crime folk only make trouble for everyone else.

I’d sent word through the usual channels that I wanted to meet with Athenril, the leader of Kirkwall's up-and-coming smuggling operation. Yet another accolade to lay at the feet of the great Hawke, I think. According to my sources, Athenril had done fine, for an elf, but her business didn't amount to much until Hawke and her bunch came along. The Coterie used to keep the other guilds in town from growing too large, but again, Hawke seems to be a game changer.

Having Hawke as muscle on her payroll meant that Athrenil had gotten overconfident and she’d slipped up. She had extended her hand too far into the pockets of others and had made herself a target, much to my delight. I received a reply that she would meet me in our usual place.

Surely after working together so long, Athenril will have more information about Hawke that I can use. I reach our meeting spot, but glancing around, it’s evident that she’s not here yet. How very unlike her, I think. Immediately on guard, I slip back into the shadows, keeping my head low. I remain still, calming my breathing and study the alleyway closely.

We had chosen this spot before, with the intent of being away from prying eyes. Kirkwall's layout is designed to be confusing and trick the unwary. There are many such alcoves and dead-ends. For those of us who have lived here any length of time, however, the twists and turns of alleys are as familiar as our own homes. These shorter alleys are often chosen for meetings such as this, as the chances are low that anyone without a reason to be there will end up there, especially at night. They have only one obvious way in or out, which also makes them perfect for springing a trap, however, I see no immediate pressure plates or tripwires. No one has attempted to ambush me so far. The streets just seem...deserted. What could be keeping her?

After a few moments, my unease grows. My past with Athenril is complicated, but she wouldn't just avoid me intentionally. I know too much to be kept waiting. Something must have happened.
Thankfully, I know a bit about her habits, her usual haunts, and where she resides. She currently has two places she calls home: her main house and a spare for hiding out. I approve of this system and have a similar - if less glamorous - system myself. If someone or something had spooked her earlier tonight, she'll head for her safe house. I turn and start walking that direction. With any luck, I'll run into her on her way.

I brought my favorite daggers with me tonight, all curves and angles, but I wish I had my staff. I don't need it, technically. Mages are born with their power, although most don't realize it until later, especially those born to non-magic families. We can cast without aid of a focus, but it's harder to aim and control. Unfortunately, carrying a mage staff through town isn't a good way to hide the fact that you're an apostate. So, as usual, I'll have to make do without.

I start back down the narrow alleys, keeping my breath quiet and relatively still, on the alert for some change, which is probably the only reason I hear it. I pass by an opening at a crossroads, and my path would have taken me straight through, but I pick up on the faint sound of voices to my left. Pausing, I turn and take a few steps toward the alley.

The voices are coming from this direction, I'm sure of it, I think, but there is no one to be seen. I remember another lesson from my old mentor. She used to say that when you can't see your enemy, remember that they could be coming from any direction, including up or down - great advice that has served me well more than once. Observing the area in front of me again, I still don't find any traps, but I spot a metal plate covering an opening in the street. Access to the sewers, perhaps?

Closer inspection does indeed show the metal plate to be a culvert, and light shines up through the holes in the cover. I creep forward, stepping carefully to avoid making a sound. Leaning over, I peer through the holes in the lid, but I have to bend and strain to get a good look.

I can see Athenril, and from her tone, I gather she is having a heated discussion. Her elven features frowning at someone. I move around a little, trying to get a better look at who she's talking to, but the angle is all wrong through the tiny holes in the culvert. The low voice tells me it's a man, and I catch a glimpse of blonde hair, but he's standing directly below me, so I can't make out any more than that. Their voices are clearer now than they had been from the crossroads. I listen attentively.

"I told you before, I have to go. That's the last I'll say about it. Nothing personal." The voice is Athenril's, but a little higher pitched than usual. She seems nervous. Is it from her blonde companion, or being late for our meeting?

"You cannot abandon the mages," the male voice says definitively.

Mages? And where have I heard that voice before? Cat appears next to me, surprising me. I nearly lose my precarious stance, squatting next to the culvert as I am. I gesture for her to be quiet and give her signals with my hands to indicate that I'm watching what's happening below. She takes the space next to me.

The male voice continues, "You know that the templars hunt us. Even this morning, I learned that another was taken. We must have access to lyrium if we are to stand a chance." Ah yes, Hawke's sour-faced apostate friend. I remember overhearing Isabela and Varric talking earlier, and she had referred to him as Anders. I knew listening to the damned dwarf would give me something useful eventually.

Athenril spoke up. "Like I said, it's not personal. You mages have coin to spend, same as everyone, but the heat is getting too much on this one. It's already costing me--"

"YOU WILL NOT JOIN THE OTHERS AGAINST US!" I jump a little at the difference in
Anders's tone. A see a flash of blue light, then nothing for a minute or two. Is that...his spirit? I'd heard of mages turning into abominations before. It was ugly. Their body becomes twisted, their mind taken over, and they think of nothing but destruction. I expect to hear screams next and brace myself, but they don't come.

“I'm sorry,” he says in a small voice, apparently having regained control of himself, and I risk peeking again. “I understand how difficult this is for you. I should go.” Again there is silence for a brief moment.

Athenril asks, “What is it?”

“WE ARE NOT ALONE. THERE IS SOMEONE HERE,” announces the booming voice again. These words register a second too late, and I gasp as I jump backwards. He looks up, eyes glowing blue.

He sees me. Shit. Shit....shit! I whisper a quick, “GO!” to Cat, who dissipates again. I run, chastising myself for not being more careful. Surely he couldn't have seen enough of me to know who I am, looking up through the small openings as he had been. How had he even known I was there? Was it Cat? Can a spirit sense another spirit?

Anger overtakes my fear. No, not Cat, damn them. Too much has been taken from me already. I'll protect her if it takes everything I have.

I slow my steps after a bit and risk a glance behind me. There doesn’t appear to be anyone following me. Blast it, that run-in ruined my meeting with Athenril! I need that information, but I can't risk going back tonight, not with that abomination so close. It’s just too dangerous. I’ll have to hide out for now, and send word again. I could always just say she stood me up. There might even be a way I can use it to my advantage.

I blame Hawke. She ruins everything she touches. When I first came to Kirkwall, I had intended to kill Hawke and be done with it, but ultimately decided that would be over far too quickly. I doubt I would be satisfied with just her death. No, she needs to suffer as I have, to lose everything.

That monster, Anders, why did he have to show up? Blessed Saint Hawke and her loyal band of misfits. She does keep strange company, granted, but her friends do make her stronger. Information or no, I'll have a hard time getting to her if she's surrounded by people like Anders and Varric. I need to rethink my plan. Maybe instead of going for Hawke directly, I should start with her friends. Yes, once the idea has taken hold, it starts to grow. Remove her friends, and Hawke will be vulnerable.

I reach my second home. It's a tiny, dirty place in Darktown. Not much to speak of, but the guards rarely come here. Being close to the old abandoned mines - not to mention firmly in Carta territory - makes it a bit more secure for me. My connection with the Carta is solid, and I'm not very likely to run into that Anders guy down this way. I know his clinic is in Darktown, but it's on the far side, and I doubt he'd brave the Carta by coming this direction without Hawke. My safe house will serve well enough to hide for the night.

I can try to have her friends killed, of course, but I think that will just get the guard involved and raise more suspicions. Maker, that's the last thing I need. No, this will have to be more subtle. Think like Corff. I don't want them pulling together against me. I don't even really need them gone, just distracted, or out of the way. If I can steer their attention away from Hawke, I can get to her more easily. And if they trust me? Even better.

My new plan is starting to take shape.
Chapter 3 – Things in Motion

My heart finally slows down after a night in my safe house in Darktown. I even slept a little, despite my fear of entering the Fade and encountering an abomination with glowing blue eyes. Cat checks on me late in the night, and I assure her that I was fine.

“Do you think it’s possible that the spirit could sense you?” I ask her.

“We spirits have different abilities. It is possible,” she says.

“I’m worried,” I tell her, “I hate to do this, but need you to stay away for a bit, Cat. I’ll call you when I think it’s safe, but if I sense any danger then you need to leave. I can’t risk losing you.” She nods her agreement and fades out of sight.

I’m not sure why the encounter rattled me as it did. Hiding my identity has become second nature to me. Of course, I have Cat’s help to make people forget if I need, but I can’t be sure her ability will work on someone who is possessed by a spirit already. I probably should have used an intermediary for my meeting, but I thought Athenril would be quicker to talk if I was there in person.

I work my normal day shift at the bar and catch up with the smuggler easily enough once night falls. I can tell she’s feeling nervous from the tense locking of her legs, but her features show only confidence. Maybe it was the meeting with me making her nervous last night, after all. I saunter into our arranged meeting place after a cursory search for traps.

“Good evening, serah” she says, seemingly politely, but her tone betrays her clenched jaw.

“No need for that; I come bearing good news,” I reply, smiling. “I’ve come to make you an offer.”

“I was worried about that,” Athenril says warily. “What do you want this time?”

“Right to it, then. I want to know more about Hawke and her companions,” I state plainly. *I don’t need subtlety here. Athenril knows I have enough dirt on her to make life difficult.*

Her expression softens into confusion. “Hawke, huh? Your little network couldn't find out for you? Why do you need me?”

I smirk, mostly ignoring her petulant tone. “She worked for you for a year. Surely someone as astute as you, with your own 'little network' looked into her background and friends? Give me something useful, Athenril. I really am here as a kindness. Make it good enough, and I might just forget that you
were taking lyrium shipments that should have gone through the Carta. Evidence gets misplaced all the time. We can easily put all this unpleasantness behind us.”

She sighs. I know she won't dare tangle with the Carta. What she doesn't know is I could just as easily turn her over to the guards. It's nice to have connections, but someone like her doesn't need to know too much about me. Loyalty is a cheap word in Kirkwall.

“Lucky for you, her year is up,” she concedes. “She's decided she's too good to work for me anymore. I'll tell you what I know, but this didn't come from me,” she pauses, her wrinkled brow suggesting she's trying to suppress a guilty conscience.

“We never had this conversation, understood.” Smiling wide, I lean in as she drops her voice.

“I found Hawke through her uncle Gamlen,” she begins. “She came here with her mother Leandra and her sister Bethany. The other twin, Carver, died on the road and never made it to Kirkwall. Leandra and Gamlen were both of House Amell, but the house is penniless, right? Gamlen...let's just say he doesn't make the smartest financial decisions. He squandered the family fortune and lost the estate after their parents died. That's where my part comes in. Gamlen owed me for a stupid idea that he convinced me to go along with.”

“Keep going,” I say, “most of what you just told me is common knowledge. That's not going to be good enough.”

“I'm getting to it. You wanted what info I have, shem, so listen to it.”

I decide to let the slight pass for now. She is being forthcoming, after all. I wave my hand in a gesture for her to continue.

“I bribed the right people so I could get Hawke, Bethany, and their friend Aveline into the city. I have to say, it's not a bad thing to have a guard indebted to you. Aveline is a one-woman battering ram, and Hawke is deadly with her daggers. But Bethany is the special one, the one who made the package all worth it. Here's your 'good stuff', Norah. Turns out Daddy Hawke was a mage and it runs strong in their blood. It's not often I get the services of an apostate. Gamlen was all too eager to tell me about it. I guess it was quite the scandal when Leandra, the treasured daughter of their noble house, left it all to be with a runaway mage. She and Malcolm Hawke took off and lived in Ferelden after that. Hawke and her sister were pretty tight-lipped about it, so I don't know much more, but I overheard Bethany once say that her father died in the Blight. The three Hawke women are now living with Gamlen in a dump in Lowtown. That's all I know.”

“About the Hawke family, anyway,” I acknowledge, thinking. Bethany's a mage. Good to know.

I'd known most of the rest already, but that piece might be worth something. “What about her friends?”

Athenril answers, looking away, “Most of them weren't around while Hawke was working for me, but I have to protect my own interests, so yeah, I had them watched for a while. I know a little. Varric, as I'm sure you already know, is a member of the Merchant's Guild. His brother Bartrand can usually be found bragging in the Merchant's Quarter about his Deep Roads expedition and all the wealth he's going to bring back. But if you notice, it's taking them an awfully long time to get started. I don't think he's as ready as he likes to put on.”

“We know Anders is a healer in Darktown, but no one seems to want to say much else, which tells me he's probably on the run from somewhere. In addition to the Circle, of course. Aveline is rising in the ranks of the city guard. She always did have a flair for intimidating people. I was right sorry when she left my employ. She mostly stays in the barracks; boring, really. The pirate girl, she calls herself Captain Isabela. Bit of a flair for the dramatic, but she's been on our watch for a while. I tried
recruiting her myself, but she turned me down. I don't know much about any of the others.”

“Thank you, Athenril. We'll be in touch”. She nods, but stays where she is as I walk away. I glance back before I turn the corner, and she's still watching me, her expression carefully neutral.

I start back to the Hanged Man. I'm not sure her information is all that useful, but maybe it really is time to let Athenril off the hook. Sure, it would buy me points with the Carta if I turn her over, but I'm already in pretty well with them. Now there's a story.

You may wonder how a human female ends up working with a dwarven crime syndicate. The Carta mostly consist of casteless dwarves who came to the surface to make a better living. They smuggle valuables like gems, runes, and most importantly, lyrium to the people topside. The sale of lyrium is highly restricted, but the demand for it is high with both templars and mages, so it's good business if the Chantry's not breathing down your neck.

Which they most definitely are in Kirkwall. It's a tough city with the tension between templars and mages. Many people stand on either side of the issue, and emotions often run high. But, this doesn't stop the requests for lyrium. If anything, demand increases as a result, with mages and templars both wanting a greater position of security.

But that's where the Carta comes in. My own involvement with them started purely by accident. Since arriving in Kirkwall, I had begun building a network of associates. Cat and I are pretty decent team at spying and blending in, but if you sell information and you don't have protection for yourself, then you're a dead woman in no time. So you first need to get in well with some of the major players in town. You have to be in the right place at the right time, and create an opportunity.

I find the best way is to find out how that group unwinds. One of the easiest groups to get involved with was the city guard. They drink their troubles away when they're not on duty, which was part of the reason I started working at the Hanged Man. Being around people when their defenses are down is useful. One night, I got off work and joined the guards for drinking and cards. Of course, my drinks were watered down, but they didn't know that. We had a good time, and I was invited back. Over the next few weeks, I figured out who the talky drunks were, and got on a first name basis with them.

Not long after, I was running an errand for Corff in Hightown. It was late afternoon, but the streets were still busy. I wasn't a big fan of coming here, at least dressed in my uniform. I stuck out like a sore thumb among the expensive silks and glittering jewels of the rich and powerful. I just wanted to finish my business and get back to Lowtown as quick as I could.

I bought the supplies we needed and turned to return home when I saw one of the guards had stopped a dwarven girl. Even with her prominent facial tattoos, I could tell she couldn't be older than 18 or 19. I went to get a closer look.

“Where did you get this, dwarf? It obviously doesn't belong to you,” barked the guard. At the girl's feet lay a pouch with several silver coins spilling out onto the pavement. She remained silent, looking at the ground.

“There you are!” I exclaimed warmly, as I approached. I touched the girl on the arm gently. “How did you get lost anyway?” I didn't give her time to respond, but instead addressed the guard. “She works for us; she was helping us do our shopping, but we got separated.” I picked up the coin pouch. “Well, we've got to be going.”

“Wait just a minute…” the guard started, but a second guard had just walked up. I knew this one, her name was Brennan.
“Norah! What are you doing in Hightown?” she asked.

“Just up here doing a little shopping for Corff. Said he had an idea for a new drink,” I replied, giving an amused shake of my head. This much was true, technically. Another lesson from my mentor: always go with the truth as much as you can. It makes it easier to remember later.

“You know this woman?” the other guard asked.

Brennan nodded. “She's the one from the Hanged Man. Remember, I told you about the night I lost my ass at Wicked Grace? Norah here's the one who walked away with the pot.”

I forced a blush, and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. “Just luck; I'm sure you'll win next time”. If I stop cheating, that is. “But, like I was saying, we have to get back. Will I see you there tonight?”

“Nah, maybe I’ll come this weekend. I'm a little short on money at the moment, for some reason.” We both laughed, and I guided the dwarf girl away from the two guards.

We didn't speak at all until we were well out of Hightown and back in the comfortable winding streets of Lowtown.

The dwarf blurted out, “That was amazing!” but then her expression changed. “Wait, you don't want something weird from me do you? Why did you help me anyway?”

“Calm down, I just saw you were in trouble.” I leaned in and whispered, “I remember my first time pickpocketing too.” Her eyes widened. “But you're casteless, and topside. How did you survive this long without learning how to steal?”

“You seem to know a lot about us,” she said, again wary.

I laughed, and said, “Knowing a lot about things is how I get by.”

She smiled again. “So I'm free to go then?”

“I was hoping you'd answer my question, but I won't force you.” I backed off, handing the coin pouch back to her. “But be a little more careful next time, okay? You won't always have someone to look out for you.”

The next morning, I had a note under my door. The dwarf girl I helped was the niece of Benor, a local Carta boss. Her name is Telun, and that simple interaction had just secured me a powerful set of allies. Things have gone pretty smoothly from there. I help them from time to time, doing favors for them in situations where dwarves would stand out too much. I'm sure that association will come back to haunt me eventually, but so far it's been helpful. The stories people tell about the Carta are really overrated. They're ruthless to their enemies, sure, but as a whole, they're not so bad. They know how to cut loose and have fun as much as the next bunch, and they have a lot more cohesion than any of the other organizations I've encountered.

Getting by in Kirkwall isn't easy, but it's better when you have connections. I guess you could say I have “friends” everywhere.

Chapter End Notes

The slow setup is complete. Now that you're starting to see how Norah's system works,
you'll get to see her put her plan in motion with Hawke's friends starting with Chapter 4, to be released tomorrow (Friday)!
Making Friends and Influencing People

Chapter Summary

Norah starts implementing her plan to infiltrate Hawke's inner circle.

Chapter Notes

No more set up, there's no turning back now. Buckle up.

Chapter 4: Making Friends and Influencing People

I awaken that morning in a good mood. I have some information that could hurt Hawke, and better yet, a plan that has a good chance of working. I hadn't handled things with my usual finesse after the whole "glowy abomination" scare, but I'd gotten results, nevertheless. I'll have one of my contacts deliver the evidence with a letter to Athenril letting her know how much her efforts are appreciated.

I need to find a way to worm my way into Hawke's inner circle and make friends with them. I'm usually good at this part. Part of being able to hide who you are means that you can be anyone. Convincing someone is just a matter of figuring out what they want. I know the Deep Roads expedition will be happening soon. That means some of Hawke's friends will be going with her, and my time with them will be limited, but which of Hawke's companions should I start with?

I realize the most obvious choice is Varric. He seems to be a central force among the others. If I can convince him to trust me, then I'll have a better shot at getting to the rest. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Befriending Varric is not going to be an easy task, however. Between Cat and I watching him, we have learned that while he is cordial to a lot of people, there aren't many that really gain his confidence. He is already part of the expedition, as well, so if he's my target, I had best be quick about it.

I've heard stories about Varric Tethras from my Carta contacts. He worked with them in the past, but had separated himself from it, which is pretty impressive by itself. I don't want the Carta to catch onto my interest in him, so I can't afford to ask too many questions. I bet his fancy crossbow is connected to it, somehow. Sadly, given his own history with them, I suspect pulling the Carta card isn't going to help me with this one.

No, Varric is going to be tricky. He's not easily intimidated, but not generally unkind either. Good sense of humor, too. His involvement with the Dwarven Merchant's Guild means he's connected with higher social circles. His information network seems useful; he always seems to be aware of things going on around town. I can't tell how much he really knows, but he's experienced at gathering information. Outright lies will probably tip him off and get me caught before I can even get started. Maybe a direct angle, but with a twist. Might knock him off guard a little.

I get dressed for the day, putting on the hated uniform, and head to the Hanged Man to start my
midday shift. Varric is sitting at one of the tables in the bar, writing furiously into a book. He's the only one here - I guess it's still fairly early. I study him, taking in his tailored coat and gold earring. Not too flashy, but I can tell it had cost him a pretty penny. His expression is pensive as he scribbles with his quill. I approach him. “Can I get ya anything?” I ask in my perfectly practiced Kirkwall accent.

He looks up at me. “Oh, it's you,” he says, sounding rather dismissive. “Just an ale, then. Got it? Just ale.” He says this last part slowly and drawn out, stressing his syllables.

I laugh, a low and hearty sound. This catches his attention, causing him to look up again, and the grip on his quill loosens.

“You got it, boss” I reply. He crooks an eyebrow as I walk back to the bar. Waving off Corff, I grab a glass and go straight to where I know we keep the imports. Yes, this ought to do it. I pour a glass from the bottle and walk back to where he sits. He hasn't returned to his writing, instead watching me the entire time. I calmly place the drink in front of him.

“What's this supposed to be? This isn't the usual stuff.” He picks up the glass and studies the color.

“A little something special. I think you'll like it,” I explain.

“And here I didn't get you anything,” he jokes. Varric eyes the glass like it will attack him at any moment. He throws a glance at Corff, who shrugs. I can't blame him. I'd been intentionally messing up his drinks for some time now. Seemingly convinced by Corff's reaction that at least I'm not trying to poison him, he takes a sip. His expression melts, and I know I've chosen correctly.

“Maker's Breath, Valenta Red? I haven't tasted this in a long time...but I'd like to know how you managed to get hold of an ale that's almost exclusively sold in Orzammar.”

“Important word, 'almost'. Enjoy it,” I answer enigmatically, and turn to walk away. I don't get far, as Varric grabs my wrist. His large fingers are stronger than I expected. He leans in, tugging down on my wrist, leaving me no option but to put my head closer to his.

“What exactly are you up to, Cookie?” he says in a low volume. I can't help it, I burst out laughing again.

I guess I really have been a jerk to him. I can't blame him for being thrown by my sudden change in attitude. But “Cookie”? Seriously?

Pain hits my shoulder and I'm suddenly being dragged away from Varric, my wrist slipping out of his grasp. His startled expression shows he had been just as distracted as I had by our exchange and hadn't noticed anyone approaching. My arm is pulled at a cruel angle. I stumble, nearly falling, but thankfully regain my composure, as the pressure on my arm doesn't let up. I finally manage to turn and see who has accosted me. Anders. Not this again! My thoughts immediately go to Cat. I need to resolve this quickly. I can't have her involved in any of this.

“Ow, you're hurting me, stop it,” I cry out. That's it, keep your cool, Norah, I think to myself, trying to keep from reacting. Mage powers have a tendency to go off unintentionally under duress. I can't make this more of a scene than this already is. I focus on the training from my previous life and slow my breathing.

Anders pauses for a moment at my words and a frown furrows his brow, but he doesn't let go of my arm. His startled expression shows he had been just as distracted as I had by our exchange and hadn't noticed anyone approaching. My arm is pulled at a cruel angle. I stumble, nearly falling, but thankfully regain my composure, as the pressure on my arm doesn't let up. I finally manage to turn and see who has accosted me. Anders. Not this again! My thoughts immediately go to Cat. I need to resolve this quickly. I can't have her involved in any of this.

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Anders pauses for a moment at my words and a frown furrows his brow, but he doesn't let go of my arm. I look back toward Varric, but he's already busy fending off a protective Corff, his soothing voice telling him to back off, that he will handle this. Corff looks at me, his eyes questioning. I shake my head at him, wordlessly telling him not to intervene. Varric walks over to the two of us and Anders starts leading me again, toward the back hallway.
“Have you lost your shit, Blondie?” Varric asks. “Let go of the nice waitress.”

“This woman is a viper. She's a spy for the templars.” His tone is harsh, but it's not the deep voice I had heard when his spirit had spoken.

Templars? Even I know not to tempt fate like that. Wait, he thinks I'm just a spy? Then he hadn't sensed Cat last night, after all. I try not to let my relief show through. But if it wasn't Cat, how had he found out about me, then? I need more information, but I'm not going to get it with him this angry.

“Templars? That's what you believe?” I scoff. “Nothing could be further from the truth; I'd never work for them.”

“But you don't deny you're a spy?” he asks tensely, and his grip tightens. I wince.

“You don't need to do that,” I say, inclining my head toward his hand. “I'll tell you...but not here. Can we speak in private?”

Varric finally speaks up, “Don't move without me, I'm just going to grab my drink. I want to hear this, but Valenta Red is just too good to let it go to waste.”

We end up in Varric's private suite. Anders doesn't let go of me until we reach the doorway. He pushes me in before him, blocking any chance of retreat. Little does he know, I have no intentions on leaving. While the timing is unexpected, this is an opportunity - two in one go. My shoulder definitely doesn't see it that way, though. I massage it absentmindedly. Anders's mouth briefly turns down at the corners.

Guilt? No, probably not.

“So, do you want to start, or should I? You obviously have questions for me;” I say.


“Alright, then. Why were you spying on my meeting?” Anders questions.

“I was looking for Athenril myself. I'm...a friend,” I answer.

“She didn't react like she was expecting friends,” Anders says, unimpressed.

Varric interjects, “I don't think that's the kind of friend she meant.”

Huh, maybe Varric's own information network is better than I thought. “He's right. I'm referring to the Friends of Red Jenny. I'm one of them.” Partially true, anyway. Keep it close to the facts. “Have you heard of us?”

Anders became thoughtful for a moment. “Only vague rumors when I was in Ferelden. I heard they were a web of loosely connected spies and assassins.”

“Close. It's mostly just everyday folk. Like servants, and barmaids.” I shrug and smirk. “We each do something, small things, really: lock a door, 'forget' to lock a door, listen at a door; eventually, everyone gets something out of it.”

Realization dawns on his face. “Wait, you're the reason she was in such a hurry to leave.” I nod. “What was your business with her?”

“Private. Suffice it to say it had nothing to do with templars.”
Anders frowns. “How can I possibly believe you?”

“Think about it, really; when have you known the templars to have any subtlety?” I ask. “They’re more the type to believe everything can be solved at the end of a sword. Whereas our Friends are everywhere, and we see a lot. For example, I already know who you are, Anders. Your clinic is common knowledge, as well as how you help the Ferelden refugees and the poor. You are suspected of involvement with the mage underground. If we had wanted to turn you over, we could have done it a long time ago. There was no need; you’re doing more for our cause to help the average folk than most.”

He’s silent again for a moment. “If that’s true and it wasn’t you, then why did Athenril cut off trading lyrium with us?”

“That one’s easy. Pressure from the Carta,” I say plainly. Another half-truth. My mentor would be so proud.

Varric comments, “That tracks, Blondie. Everyone knows that the Carta smuggle lyrium out of Orzammarr and broker all the deals topside. They wouldn't take kindly to someone cutting into their business. That might have been okay when Hawke was working for Athenril, but now with her year ending...”

I make a disgusted noise at the mention of Hawke's name. Anders doesn't seem to notice, but Varric tilts his head back at an angle. “You got something against Hawke?”

“She creates trouble wherever she goes, and it's always the little people who suffer when that happens,” I say. “That's the exact opposite of what our Friends are trying to accomplish. I don't trust her to see the consequences of her choices.”

Varric shrugs, his expression noncommittal.

Anders is still. He sighs. “I may have misjudged you. It's just...he felt your presence so strongly. I was certain you must be working with the templars, that you were a threat to mages,” he trails off, his voice becoming quieter with every word.

I inhale, and take a big risk. “He being your spirit, you mean?”

His head turns sharply to stare at me. “You saw him, then.” I nod. “It's not what you think. He's not a demon, he is a benevolent spirit of Justice. We partnered together to help the mages with their plight.”

“Why would he react to me then? I've already told you I have no interest in helping the templars.” Not directly anyway, but he doesn't need to know that. I'm not above using them if it comes to it, but a stronger templar army would be a greater threat to me, as well, being what I am.

Anders begins, “I'm not sure, but when I first met him, he helped those who fought against oppression. Since bonding with me, our efforts have been focused solely on aiding the mages and fighting templar abuses. It hasn't happened in a while, but maybe he was sensing a need in you for justice. If so, it's possible that's what he noticed that night, and what led us here today. You must have been wronged somehow.”

Oh Maker, it's me. I'd been the one that had drawn Justice's attention. It was never Cat. I put her at risk. I feel guilt welling up inside me, and I know I'm having trouble maintaining my calm exterior. Breathe, inhale. Now is not the time to think about it. Years of harsh lessons had schooled my body well. Exhale. I purse my lips and focus. Remember your training.
I jerk back to awareness when a voice speaks close to my ear. “What is it? Are you alright?” I realize Anders has moved closer and he's looking at me with concern. “You're thinking about it again, he can feel it. What is your need for justice?”

“It's not your concern,” I say evasively, backing away slightly, although I can't move much in the chair. I hate how small my voice sounds. I remember to use the accent, but barely.

“Perhaps I can help?”

“A minute ago you wanted my head on a platter, and now you want to help?” I remark incredulously.

“Hold on, Cookie. He's not the only one whose personality changed in a heartbeat,” comments Varric calmly, but there's an edge of impatience in his voice. “Seems to be a case of it running around,” he mutters.

“You're right,” I admit.

“I usually am, but it still doesn't explain things,” he points out.

“What's with this Cookie nonsense?” I ask, smiling a little again.

He grins back. “You know, you're always prickly every time I see you, and suddenly now you're all sweet, like a cookie. I don't know, it just seemed to fit the moment and it stuck.”

Anders interrupts, “You really won’t tell me? Now that I know you're not involved with the templars, I feel horrible for having hurt you. I overreacted. I should make it up to you somehow.”

My smile deflates. “I'm fine now, that's really not necessary. You don't need to get involved. Besides, I...I have someone I need to protect,” I reply in all sincerity. “I just can't.”

I can't imagine what I would do if something happened to Cat. This did not go the way I had planned. This is the second time Anders has thrown things off for me. I guess not everything is lost, however. He knows who I am now and he's being nicer to me. I'll still count that as a win.

Varric says, “All better now, Anders? Good. Maybe you should go now and let us finish our conversation.”

“Can I visit you again?” Anders asks me, ignoring Varric. “Justice wants to make it right, as well. Maybe there’s another way I can help you.”

“Fine, if that's what you want, but be a bit more discreet next time. I'm going to have a lot to explain to Corff as it is.”

He nods, mouth tense, turns on a heel and strides back out into the bar.
On the Stubbornness of Dwarves

Chapter Summary

How will Norah get close with the savvy Varric?

Chapter Notes

Surprise mid-week upload! This story wants to be told, I just couldn't hold it all back until Friday.

Chapter 5: On the Stubbornness of Dwarves

I watch as Anders walks away, and turn to Varric. “Is he always that pushy?” I ask.

He ignores my attempt at distraction. “I think you were just about to offer me an explanation.”

“How’s getting out of that one, huh?” I joke. “It’s not so complicated, really. I came to realize I had been judging you by the company you keep, and not your own actions. You already know my opinion of Hawke. She's dangerous, and I saw you as an extension of her influence. But then as I watched you, I've found out that you're not the same as her. The drink was an apology. For what it's worth, I've been an ass, and I'm sorry.”

“Pretty words, Cookie, but I happen to know there's more,” he says, sitting back and steepling his fingers.

Stall, Norah. “What? Nothing I’ve said is untrue.”

“Okay, but there's a lot you're 'not saying'. What I want to know is, why didn’t you tell Blondie who you really are?”

Shit, what does he know? Better to dodge. “If you know so much, why didn’t you tell him?” I retort.

“I want to hear you say it. You're not just a Friend of Red Jenny.” Oh, that.

“You got me,” I say, putting my hands up in sign of surrender. “I'm more than a 'friend'. I am Red Jenny.” Varric doesn't react. That's what he knows, then. I continue. “I've found it's better not to give more detail than is necessary. You know as well as I do that secrets are expensive around here. For example, I'd like to know what you paid for that particular detail about me.”

“More than I should have, I'm sure. Well, now that the introductions are over,” he leans forward, sounding far more friendly, “I gotta know, did you have anything to do with the thing with the Chantry sister the other day?”
“The one with the er...missing garments? That may have been one of mine.”

“You're shitting me. The clues posted in town each day on where to find another pair of her underpants? Brilliant. You had all of Hightown on a scavenger hunt; we even found a pair in the Blooming Rose.”

“Guess that brings a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘Andraste's knickers,’” I quip. We both have a good laugh. “You want another drink?” I say, standing up.

“Maker yes.”

*             *             *

After breaking the ice with Varric, I now have a way to spend more time with Hawke's other friends. Later in the week, Isabela and Merrill join Varric and I for a game of Wicked Grace after my shift.

“Why do you always win at cards?” the young elf girl asks Isabela.

“Because I cheat, Kitten,” she answers, chuckling.

Merrill is someone I like instantly. I try to remember a time that I was as innocent as she is. I admit, I envy her for that. I think she reminds me a bit of Cat. *Maybe that's why I like her.*

I look at my cards. *Ugh, my hand is awful this round.* I think instead about my mission, and feel a pang of guilt about enjoying the company.

I've learned enough already that I can probably remove some of Hawke's friends. I mean, I'm sure someone from Tevinter is looking for the broody elf, who I've since learned is named Fenris. That might take a little work, but I believe I can find out who. Bethany, who I have yet to meet, is an apostate. Anders is an abomination, a runaway mage, and—if Athenril is to be believed—hiding from someone else. Isabela makes bad choices on a daily basis that could come back to haunt her. I've started befriending them in the hopes of taking them away from Hawke..but I don't have to actually hurt them to accomplish that, do I?

*Wait, who am I kidding? These aren't my friends, they're Hawke's people.* I have to harden my emotions a bit more. I can have fun, yes, but I shouldn't get too comfortable.

I remember the voice of my mentor again: “Become someone else for a while, but don't let it become who you are,” she would say. The reality is that I am alone, just me and Cat. I can't even tell these people about her. No matter how much I like them, they can never know the real me. Maybe it is time to just use the information I've gathered and get it over with.

Luckily Hawke walks in the door of the Hanged Man at that moment, sparing me from having to think about it anymore. She has the broody elf with her, and they head our way. “Have room for a couple more?” she asks.

“I was just on my way out, you can have my seat. My cards hate me anyway.” I sigh dramatically.

Isabela pouts a little. “Do you really have to go so soon, puss? I was just getting warmed up.” She waves her hand, gesturing toward the pile of coins she's already accumulated.

“I'll see you tomorrow, Isabela. Don't worry, Merrill will lose for me,” I tease.

“I will not! I have a good hand this time!” she protests, showing her cards.
I chuckle. “I stand corrected, my dear lady,” I say, making a sweeping bow. “I must say it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she says, smiling.

I look at my new accomplice, Varric. He makes a similar, but smaller bow from where he's sitting, “Good night,” he says simply. His eyes flick meaningfully to Hawke and back to me, but he doesn't say anything more.

“Hawke,” I manage to bite out a greeting without sounding too curt, “and Fenris, is it? I'm Norah. I've heard a lot about you from Varric.”

“All lies, I'm sure,” he says, dryly.

“Then you'll have to tell me the real story next time,” I say in parting.

Waving one last time, I head toward the door. I force myself walk slowly, even though I feel like storming out. Hawke. You're the cause of all this.

I hear Hawke saying my name behind me to one of the others, but I don't bother turning around. Let her talk about me all she wants. She'll find out who I am when I'm good and ready, not on her time. I still have work to do. Head held high, I exit the tavern.

The cool evening air hits me, and I immediately feel a bit better. My head clears a little as I walk. I'm a few blocks away when Cat appears next to me. “You said we were going to do something fun next time. How about now?”

Dearest Cat. I didn't realize until just now how much I'd missed her. I hadn't dared summon her again, especially not after Anders had promised to visit me. So far, he hadn't shown up, but I was sure he would sometime soon. I realize now that being away from my friend has left me lonely, and I'm happy she's here.

“I'm game. Anything you're in the mood for?” I ask. I've been so busy, I've forgotten to plan something for Cat's outing. Another sign I need to focus.

“Nothing yet,” she responds. “I'll just go wherever you're going, and we'll pick something that looks fun along the way.”

“Sure, that works. But, you might want to make yourself harder to see. I know you can make people forget, but we're better off not running into trouble.” Cat fades into a thin shimmery outline in the creeping darkness.

I have a home in Lowtown. Well, technically Norah the Barmaid has a home in Lowtown. I have to keep up the appearances of being a waitress, after all. As a result, my place is cramped, but at least it's clean. I probably could have had a room at the Hanged Man if I wanted, but I like being away from the riffraff. Tonight, however, I walk in the opposite direction from my place. An adventure with Cat sounds like exactly what I need.

The two of us travel in silence for a few blocks. There aren't many people left on the streets at this time of day, which is why I'm shocked when I round the corner and nearly run into two templars standing in the alley. Thankfully, they're facing away from me, and haven't yet noticed me. I hastily retreat around the corner.

“I think it's this way,” I hear the one say to the other. The clanging of boot steps heads away.
I whisper to Cat, “I think we've found our fun.”

What could two templars be doing in Lowtown this late at night? Cat isn't the only one who's curious. In a practiced move, I quietly remove my short twin daggers from beneath my skirts. I prefer my bigger curved ones, but I had worked at the bar today. I can't exactly wear them openly like that, it will attract too much attention. These smaller ones are much easier to hide. They'll do in a pinch, it just means I'll have to get closer to my targets. Not the best strategy for facing men in full armor who are practiced in fighting mages, especially dressed in my work clothes, but I have been through worse. For now, I follow at a safe distance and wait to see what they do.

I don't have to wait long before they stop. I recognize this area, and a sinking feeling fills my chest. Oh no, this is Hawke's place. I know Hawke's sister Bethany is an apostate. Shit, they're here to take her to the Gallows, and I've just seen Hawke at the Hanged Man playing cards. From what I've been informed about her uncle Gamlen's habits, he'll be at the Blooming Rose at this time of day, which means that only Bethany and their mother Leandra might be in the house. I don't much care what happens to Leandra. She's as much to blame as Hawke for what happened to me, if not more. But Bethany isn't. I slip into the shadows, adjust my grip on my daggers and wrestle with my conscience.

The templars pound on the door, and when there is no response, kick it open. I wince.

Just a few moments ago, I had been considering turning her over to the templars myself. Why is this so hard for me? I don't even know her, really. She's nothing to me. All I have to do is let them take her, and she'll be out of the way. Maybe she won't even be home. They'll search and she won't be in there and I won't have to decide yet.

That's when I hear a scream.
Norah is faced with a difficult decision: will she help Bethany against the templars, or allow her to be taken as part of her plot to destroy Hawke?

My indecision ends when I hear her screams. I can now hear a scuffle going on inside, including the hissing sound of spells hitting armor. I leap into action, sprinting across the courtyard toward the door. “Cat, hang back on this one. I'll try to make it a good show,” I say quietly.

The templars appear again in the doorway, dragging a dark-haired young woman outside onto the landing. One of them backhands her with his gauntleted hand. Her screams cut off, becoming more of a whimper. When they turn to march her down to the street, they finally notice me standing at the bottom of the stairs. I had hidden my short daggers between the folds of my skirt, and I remind myself to keep my hands at my sides so they don't show.

“What are you doing to her?” I ask, eyes wide, trying to make my voice sound as feminine and non-threatening as I can manage.

“Templar business, woman; out of our way,” he commands, and takes a step down the stairs.

I don't move. “You brutes, can't you see she's hurt? Please, I know something about healing herbs. Let me tend to her.” I take a step closer and lean in around him, as if to inspect Bethany's injuries.

I use the opening to sink my blade into the space between his breastplate and helmet. I feel the dagger cut deep into the flesh of his neck and know I reached what I had been hoping for. Blood sprays outward in an arc as I forcefully pull it back out again. The templar clutches the side of his neck, but my strike had been true. He will bleed out, there's no stopping it now. He collapses, falling over the side of the raised landing and onto the street below.

The other templar stares incredulously for a split second, before turning back to me. “Bitch, that's the last mistake you'll ever make,” he threatens, and dumps Bethany backwards on the landing. Her knees buckle, and she falls in a heap.

The templar charges toward me, drawing his sword. I take a few steps back, my advantage now gone. This fight will be a lot tougher, especially given he has me on height by a good foot or more. I place my feet slightly apart, this part of the dance being familiar to me. I observe his movements. His jabs are jerky and aggressive. Not much in the way of style or speed, but with the greater reach of his weapon, it's effective enough that I can't get close. It's all I can do to dodge out of the way of his attacks.
I can tell he's driving me backward, and I know there is no exit that way, only a wall and more stairs leading to locked doors. I'll have to try a feint, catch him off guard. I lunge right, then turn left in mid-step. He's slow to react, but my bulky skirts and the difference in our size work against me - he kicks out and manages to connect with my shin.

I trip and fall forward, catching myself on my hands and knees. My daggers clatter across the stone street, out of reach, useless. Sharp stabbing sensations jolt up both legs and arms. *Ow, I'm going to feel that tomorrow.* I attempt to get to my feet, but I'm not quite quick enough. He catches hold of me by hair and pulls me the rest of the way upright.

“You're a dead woman,” he growls, pulling his sword backward behind him. I feel the magic rising up inside me. Without a focus, this won't be easy. I can probably manage a barrier, but I've never tried casting around a templar before at all, let alone without my staff. I don't have a lot of confidence that this will work.

I raise my hand a little to cast the barrier spell, when the templar freezes. Not stops, but truly freezes solid. Frost creeps up his armor.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Bethany over by the entryway, leaning against the door frame, a staff in her hand. I can tell she'll have one hell of a bruise tomorrow, but she's standing at least. I don't waste any more time, and wriggle out of the templar's grasp. I lose a few strands of hair in the process, but at least I'm free. I grab the nearest dagger from the ground and slice his throat as I had the other templar's. It gives way with a sickening shattering motion, his flesh falling outward in small fragmented pieces. The spell ends, and he falls, landing in front of me with a solid thud.

*Maker, that was a close one.* I give him a good shake with my foot to make sure he's finished. Not even a twitch. I make my way back toward the stairs, retrieving the second dagger on the way. Bethany descends the stone steps, meeting me in the middle of the street.

“Are you alright?” Bethany asks. Having a better chance to look at her now, I can see the similarities between her and Hawke, but whereas Hawke's features are sharp, more striking, Bethany's are softer and kinder.

“I think that's supposed to be my line. Are all of your parties this exciting?” I joke. “But yeah, I'm good. Thanks for the assist back there, by the way.”

She looks surprised. “No, I should be the one thanking you. I'm the one they were looking for. I'd be halfway to the Gallows by now if you hadn't stepped in. I'm Bethany.”

“Norah,” I say. “I'm not sure I did you any favors tonight, Bethany. Two templars left to find you and disappeared? They will send more.”

“True. Maybe it would have been easier just to let them take me,” she says, crestfallen.

“It didn't look like you wanted to go from where I was standing. Or am I wrong?” I ask.

“No, I--,” she starts, but I never get a chance to hear the rest of what she is saying.

Searing pain rips through my rib cage on my left side. I look down, shocked to see an arrow sticking out of the wall. It's just a graze, but I'm already bleeding, and it's starting to soak through my blouse.

I spin around, and see nearly a dozen men pouring into the square. These men aren't templars. My guess is a local gang of bandits, seizing an opportunity. They are all dressed in similar, if low quality leather armor.
“Of all the nights,” I mutter, taking up my stance again and preparing to attack. I sense movement behind me, and realize Bethany is standing next to me, back to back. Interesting.

Things feel a bit like a blur after that, dodging, slicing and shattering. It's a novel experience for me to have my targets frozen or weakened by magic, but I have to admit it's damned effective. *I hope Cat is enjoying this.* Bethany and I rotate around each other, and I take out more of the men stunned by her spells, giving her an opportunity to get to the other side. It feels like we're making progress, but we don't appear to be reducing their numbers enough. How many men do they have, anyway?

I sweep my leg out, knocking the man in front of me prone, and stab him forcefully in the chest with both daggers. I move on to the next, trying to ignore the burning in my side. I'm worried that Bethany might be reaching her limit. I know from personal experience that casting multiple spells like that takes a lot out of you.

I kick another man away from me, his arm dangling uselessly at his side, when a burst of magic hits him from the right. *Wait, Bethany is behind me, that couldn't have been her spell. Where the blazes had that come from?* There are just too many of them, I can't see anything.

I experience a tingle of magic, and I suddenly feel like I have the energy to fight forever. I slash and parry with renewed vigor and speed until there is finally no one left standing in front of me. I spot a lone archer at the top of the staircase to my right. He has an arrow drawn and aimed, but not at me. I throw one of my daggers, and I inwardly cheer as it hits him blade-first in the face. His arrow looses, going harmlessly wide, just as a bolt of energy hits him square in the chest. His body tumbles limply down the steps.

All I can hear for a second is the sound of my own labored breathing echoing off the walls of the courtyard. It's over. The energy from that tingling spell is gone, and I find myself exhausted. The pain from the arrow wound in my side returns as well, feeling like it's on fire. *I have got to learn that spell, whatever it was.*

I can no longer feel Bethany near me, but spot her quickly, sitting on the steps, clearly as spent as I am. In the archway leading out of the square stands Anders, staff still glowing from the last spell. He's staring at me with an unreadable expression. Neither of us say anything for a moment. I break eye contact and look down. My hands are scraped and abraded from the fight; I'm covered in blood, some of it my own. I can only imagine what he must be thinking about me right now.

“Are you alright?” he asks, and I'm not sure if he's talking to me or Bethany.

She answers first. “I will be, but this mess will bring trouble. We shouldn't stay here.”

Anders takes in the scene, including the two dead templars. “Maker's Breath, Bethany, they came for you?”

“They tried,” she says. “I don't know how they even knew where to look. I thought it was over for me, but then Norah showed up. She fought them off - you should have seen her, Anders. I was able to get back up and help her against these other guys. You arrived toward the end of it, thank the Maker. I don't know how much longer we could have held up.”

“Bethany, remind me not to attend your next party,” I say weakly, exhaustion sapping my usual energy.

“You two know each other?” he asks, looking between the two of us.

“Not really. Just chanced by at the right time,” I say, not able look him in the eye. “But, now that
you're safe, I should probably be going.”

I need to get home, wash the blood off and nurse my wounds. I know a healing spell that should help take the edge off, even if I am out of practice at casting. Not to mention Cat is waiting; she'll no doubt want to talk about what she has seen.

“Wait!” both Anders and Bethany say in unison.

I ignore what was probably going to be more questions. “Bethany's right, you know. This will attract attention. We shouldn't be seen here in the street. So, another time, then.” With this final farewell, I start walking back the way I came. My vision starts to blur, and I start to lose my balance. *I just have to make it home to my staff*. 

I barely reach the edge of the courtyard before the world goes dark.
Delving Deep

Chapter Summary

Norah reluctantly gets help, and remembers things about her early past.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Mild parental abuse or neglect themes as Norah remembers her childhood.

Chapter 7: Delving Deep

The first thing I notice is light. It flickers. Then voices. Where am I? I try to open my eyes. The light hurts my eyes, and I close my lids most of the way again. After a few attempts, my sight adjusts. Magic. The light is from magic. Blue and beautiful. It feels cool to the touch, and soothing in a comfortable way I'm not sure I've ever felt before. My memory starts to return. The fight... Cat!

I sit up with a start. Something falls onto my lap. It's a damp cloth, but I spare it only a momentary glance before checking out my surroundings. I'm sitting on what appears to be a table. Anders stands over me, the blue light now gone. I feel a chill, and notice I'm no longer wearing my blouse, and my torso is wrapped in some sort of bandage. I must have been unconscious for awhile, long enough for someone to wash most of the blood from my skin, although I can tell my hair is still crusted with filth. I'm glad I wasn't awake during any of that, and I try not to think about having been undressed.

He healed me? That must have been the blue light, but where is Cat? I turn my head and search the room, hunting for the familiar glow that will give away her position, but there's no sign of her. I do see Bethany slouched in a chair in the corner, covered in a blanket. She seems to be sleeping soundly.

“Don't try to get up,” Anders instructs, gently but firmly pushing me back down onto the table. He places the wet compress back on my head. “The arrow that grazed you was poisoned. You've been out for a few hours. We brought you to my clinic.”

“Bethany's family, are they okay? I just realized I didn't even know if anyone else was in the house,” I say, knowing that while I am interested, my concern is a lie. I can summon no sympathy for Leandra.

“Yes, Bethany was the only one home,” he answers. “The others are fine. Why didn't you tell me you were injured? Your stubbornness nearly got you killed, Norah.”

I can't very well tell him I had planned to grab my staff and heal myself when I got home. I've done it
before, but I hadn't been poisoned then. Per usual, I settle for as close to the truth as I can give him. “I told you, I have someone to protect. She's not safe without me. I had to go...I still have to,” I say, moving to get up again.

“No,” he says, forcing me back into a sitting position, but he doesn’t try to make me lie down again.

“Just no?” I ask, incredulously.

“I gave you some healing herbs, but without knowing what kind of poison it was, I can't be certain it's out of your system. You could become ill again. You should stay here a little longer,” he explains. Ok, that's actually not a bad reason. “And,” he continues, “I was hoping we could talk.” Great.

“Alright,” I say, agreeing reluctantly. “But I need to do something first. Let me send word through the Friends network. I need to know if she's safe. It won't take more than a few minutes, but they won't talk to me if you're there.”

He looks as though he wants to protest again, but then nods, suddenly melancholy. “I had someone like that once. A friend I tried to protect. I understand. Can I trust you not to run off?”

“I don't give my word unless I mean it. I'll come back. But, I need something to wear,” I finish, feeling uncomfortable. I cross my arms over my chest.

He walks over to a small door in the wall, opens it and reaches in. When he returns, he hands me a shirt - a woman’s blouse. I pull it on over my head. It's a little too loose, but at least I'm covered. Why does he have something like this? I give him an odd look. “Hey, it's not mine,” he says. “You'd be surprised how many times a small stock of clothing has come in handy. People get stabbed a lot around here.”

I stand, and find my balance better than I expected. He does good work, I'll give him that. I walk to the door without looking back.

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I hurry the short distance to my safe house, shut the door behind me, and immediately call for Cat.

It feels like an eternity before she appears. I exhale, relief flooding through me. “Thank the Maker you're alright. I woke up and didn't see you.”

“I left when the mage with the spirit showed up. You told me you didn't want me around him because he might sense me,” she says. That makes sense. She hadn't been there to see how things ended. “I could have helped in the fight, though. You should have let me.”

“I didn't want you to get hurt,” I say. “Templars have abilities that block magic. I didn't know what would have happened if they had attacked you.”

She's quiet for a moment. “I like that you try to show me new things. But do you remember how I found you?” asks Cat.

She seems to be after something. I think back to the day I had first met her. I was ten, and lived in Orlais. That day, I had already been training with blades for hours with my mentor, Sophie, and was getting tired. Lady Colette was watching our sessions, as she often did to monitor my progress. She was my aunt, not that she ever treated me as such. At that time, she was all I had known. I wanted to
please her, so I kept going, even though I felt that my reserves were all spent.

My foot slipped, and I landed straight on my behind. Ever the ruthless teacher, my mentor moved in for the strike. I panicked, and that's when I first used my magic. A raw burst of power sprang from me, lashing out and knocking my mentor across the room, where she slammed roughly into the far wall. I had no idea what had just happened. Sophie was picking herself up, a furious expression on her face.

“You could have mentioned she was a mage,” Sophie snarled at Lady Colette.

“My dear, I had no idea,” Lady Colette said, Orlesian accent thick. “But I'm delighted! Just think of the possibilities.” Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

“You should turn her over to the Circle, Lady Colette,” insisted my mentor. “She needs proper training. The Chant says that magic exists to serve man.”

“Religious superstition and poppycock. She can have a tutor right here at home. Oh, I can't wait to see what she's capable of!” my adoptive mother exclaimed, undeterred. “And you will continue these lessons, as well, of course.”

“I don't think I can do this,” said Sophie, uncertain.

“I'll pay you double!” Lady Colette announced.

“It's not a matter of the money. We will end our lesson here for the day. Perhaps we should both take time to consider this.”

“Yes, you consider carefully,” my adoptive mother said snidely. “I never thought I'd hear the Chant from someone like you. You bards break every rule the Maker and Blessed Andraste ever gave.”

I was confused. I'm a mage? How was that even possible? Lady Colette was excited about the news, which made me happy, but why was my mentor so upset?

“I'm sorry I hurt you,” I said. Maybe if I apologized, it would make it better. I liked Sophie. She was strict, but she had taught me a lot already. Sometimes, after a good day, she would even sneak a sweet treat to me. “I didn't mean to.”

“Yes, you consider carefully,” my adoptive mother said snidely. “None of that is your fault. But you need to learn to control this power, just like we've been working on controlling your expressions and emotions,” she paused. “This will be very hard, though, and you need someone to guide you.” She looked at Lady Colette. “I pray that you get it.”

And with that my mentor walked out of my life. It wasn't the last time I would see her, but I didn't know that then. At the time, all I could see was that someone else that I trusted, and who seemed to care about me, had abandoned me, just as Lady Colette had told me my own mother had done. This was long before I had learned about my mother's true fate.

That night, I cried myself to sleep. I finally drifted off, and entered the Fade for the first time. It was confusing and disorienting, and I quickly lost my way. My sadness bled into the surrounding landscape, changing it. I was afraid. I sat next to a gnarled black tree trunk and hugged my knees to my chest.

“Are you lost? Why are you crying?” a voice asked. I looked up to see a girl, around the same age as me. She knelt down next to me. “What happened?”
“Nobody ever wants to stay with me,” I said, wiping my face with the back of my hand.

“Do you want me to stay with you?” she asked, without a hint of hesitation.

Our journey out of the Fade proved more difficult than that simple question. But it was the start of everything for Cat and I.

“I remember that night in the Fade, but I'm not sure what you mean. Why did you come to me?” I wonder.

“It was your feelings that brought me to you. I found your emotions interesting. I didn't really have any then, other than a need to find things that were new and different. The more I was around you, the more I felt other things too. I didn't want that to stop. I still don't. But your feelings have changed again lately.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“You like Hawke's friends, but they also make you sad. I liked it when you were happy with them. It was different. I think I want to feel more of that. I want to stay with you, but I don't want to watch you to get hurt, either. I don't want you to tell me not to help anymore.”

“Oh, Cat,” I say, moved. I hug her, and she lets me. “I'm sorry I stopped you from being with me. Of course I want you to help. Just be careful, okay? Oh, I did learn something,” I add, suddenly remembering. “It was never you that attracted Justice. Turns out it was all my fault. I think it's safe for you to come with me now, but I have to go back to Anders. I promised. Just stay out of sight, okay?”

Cat's honest plea to help me reassures me that I at least have one person who doesn't want to leave. I still feel apprehensive about this talk with Anders. I know he will want to know about me, want answers I can't give him. As long as Cat is with me, I'm not alone. It will be enough; it has to be.
Partings and New Parties

Chapter Summary

When Hawke leaves for the Deep Roads with some of her companions, Norah sees her chance to play nice with those she left behind.

Chapter 8: Partings and New Parties

I leave my safe house and return to Anders's clinic without incident. He is standing just outside his door, clearly intending to head out.

“You took such a long time, I got worried the poison had knocked you out again. I was coming look for you,” he says, a concerned expression on his face.

“I'm fine. All better. Healthy as a horse even,” I remark, flexing to show him I mean business. We walk back into his clinic, and he shuts the door behind us. Bethany is missing from her spot in the chair. “I told you I would come back. Where's Bethany?”

He smiles. “Hawke came and took her home. Bethany was sorry she didn't get to see you before she left, but I assured her I'd see to it that you were okay. The guards found the bodies, but with so many dead, they were left scratching their heads and couldn't determine who killed who. Hawke made up a story about the bandits killing the templars, and claimed she took out the bandits. It seemed to go over well enough.”

He steps closer, examining my face. “Anyway, it's a good sign that you're feeling better.” He puts his hand on my forehead and comments, “The poison seems to have run its course. I'd say you're probably in the clear. But there are still other things I want to discuss.”

“I want to say something first,” I say. I don't think he was quite expecting that, but he makes a hand gesture, conceding. We sit in chairs near a table opposite from one another. I'm reminded of the last time we faced each other like this at the Hanged Man. I take a deep breath and begin, “You were right.”

“Well, there's a first time for everything,” he says sarcastically.

“Just let me get this out, okay?” I say. “As I was saying, you were right. I should have said something. I thought I could handle binding my own wounds, but obviously I couldn't. It was a good thing you were there. You saved me tonight; I guess what I'm trying to say is thank you.”

Anders shakes his head. “Varric told me you have a way of keeping people guessing. He wasn't wrong.”

“You and Varric have been talking about me?” I ask, cocking an eyebrow.

“Just briefly,” he says. “I haven't told you what I was doing there when I showed up at Gamlen's house, did I? I was coming to see you. I stopped by the Hanged Man first, but you weren't there. It
was strange; Justice couldn't sense you at all then. We've felt your presence on and off for days. On
the way there, you were like a beacon, but then, nothing. I was surprised not to find you at the bar.
But anyway, that's when I talked to Varric. He and the others told me you had just left. I went to
look for you, but I wasn't sure what direction you had gone. I wish I had gotten there sooner.”

I'm careful to temper my reaction, but I think I know what happened. Hawke had shown up, and I
left angry. Don't think about it now. You can't afford to set him off again. I'd calmed after I had gone
for a walk, and Cat and I had decided to find something fun to do. I'm glad to know I can turn off
Justice's ability to sense me. I send a silent thanks to Sophie and her training.

“Well, Anders, you wanted to help me, and now you have. I guess this means we're even. No more
of this 'need to make it up to me' talk,” I comment.

“I don't know if I'd go that far,” he says, looking away. “You defended my friend tonight. What's
more, you helped a mage by fighting against templars. You took a great risk, and were injured as a
result.” His eyes return to mine as he says, “This a favor I'm not likely to forget.”

I feel a bit stunned. I had expected an interrogation when I returned here, not praise.

“I'm going into the Deep Roads tomorrow with Hawke,” he reports, changing the subject. “I wish I
wasn't - I really hate the Deep Roads. It makes me miss my cat. When I get back, I think I'd like to be
one of these “friends” you talk about. If you won't let me help you directly, then maybe I can still
return the favor in some way. It's not completely selfless, of course: if all of their people are like you,
the mage underground might benefit from their help, as well.”

“You don't know anything about them, or me for that matter,” I protest.

“What, you don't want me join up?” he says, mockingly a brief smirk appearing. “And here I thought
you were as passionate about your causes as I am about mine.”

“That's not it,” I say.

“Then tell me something about you,” he says pointedly, but then immediately keeps going before I
can say anything. “No wait, I'll go first. You're haunted by something in your past that makes Justice
take notice, but you won't talk about it, instead taking it all on your own shoulders. You're smart
enough that even Varric has trouble figuring you out at times. You're brilliant in a fight. I saw you,
not a wasted movement. You don't get that way without practice, and a good teacher. You
intervened in a fight that was not your own to help someone you didn't even know. You would risk
your health to protect someone you care about.”

“I--,” I begin, but cut off, not sure of what to say to that.

“That's a friend I wouldn't mind having, and it sounds like you could use a few friends of your own,”
he concludes.

“Is that what you're offering?” I ask.

“Just introduce me to this Red Jenny. I'll be her friend, and yours,” he said.

This one's for you, Cat. I grin. “Well then, welcome aboard, Anders, because I am Red Jenny.”

* * *

The Deep Roads Expedition has begun. Hawke left this morning, with Varric, Anders, and Aveline.
That leaves behind Bethany, Merrill, Isabela, Fenris, and a newcomer, Sebastian. I haven't had much
of a chance to speak with Fenris yet, and I haven't met Sebastian at all. Now seems like a good
chance, as Hawke can't interrupt me this time.

I feel relieved that I don't have to monitor my thoughts as much, either. Anders is gone, so I can
focus on my plan to bring down Hawke without Justice taking notice. Cat and I have regular
discussions about my progress. I'd known from the start that I wanted Hawke to suffer as I had
suffered. The more I watch her, learn about her, I realize my descriptions to Varric and Anders were
right. Hawke messes a lot of things up for everyone around her. Her choices have dire consequences,
and yet she acts as though she's above it all - just like her mother and father had. She deserves to lose
her happiness a bit at a time; to see that what she does affects others. I want Hawke to feel the sting
of betrayal. If I can convince her friends to trust me, I might be able to turn them against her.

Out of those still in town, Bethany and Isabela are the only two I know how to contact. I'll need to
start there, and then find a way to make myself useful to them. Luckily, things are never dull around
Isabela.

It has only been a few days when she asks for my help. “Say, Norah,” she calls, getting my attention.
“Can I ask you something?” She waves a hand motioning me over.

I walk over the counter where she stands, setting my tray down on a nearby table. “Sure, what is it?”
She leans in, and says in a lower voice, “I heard you’re good at handling little pricks.”

“What?” I ask, shocked.

“In fact, I heard that just the other day you had a good grip on them, and liked sticking them in
templars,” she says.  Oh, she’s talking about my daggers.  I never can tell with her.

“Who told you something like that?” I ask, joking, although I already know the answer.

“Oh, don't be coy, puss. Bethany won't shut up about what happened,” she explains. “So I have this
thing going down that I may need your help with.”

“And what's in it for me?” I ask, pretending to be skeptical while containing my excitement. It's
working, I thought.

“Bound to be some treasure treasure involved.  Look, someone I used to know from the Raiders, a
little weasel of a man named Luca, says he has information for me about...a thing I'm looking for.
But I think he's full of shit, right? He set up a meet on the Wounded Coast. It's probably an ambush.
Way I figure, I should bring some trouble of my own. Specifically your kind of trouble.”

“What are the Raiders?” I ask.

“You've never heard of The Raiders of the Waking Sea?” She asks. “How long have you been in
Kirkwall? They used to be a big problem here before the Blight hit Ferelden and all the refugees
ended up on the doorstep.”

“I've spent a little time here and there. Kirkwall has only recently become my home,” I explain,
you trying to keep it simple but vague.

“That explains it then. The Raiders are pirates and scoundrels,” she says, but the way she says it
sounds nostalgic, not disparaging. “They’re not all so bad, just most of them. I used to run with them,
when I was captain of my own ship, but I haven't seen Luca since I left Llomerryn. I didn't even
know he knew I was in Kirkwall. As for what's in it for you, he's bound to have goods, things he
'liberated' off other people. If we end up having to kill him, we can split his stuff.”
“Don’t you think we should take a little more muscle than just the two of us?” I ask.

“So you're in? Knew there was a reason I liked you,” she says, “and I'm already ahead of you. When I told her I would be asking you, Merrill insisted on coming along.”

“Huh, Bethany would have been my first choice since she’s the one who got me into this mess,” I comment with a touch of sarcasm. “Seriously, is there anyone she hasn't told? Hm, if not Bethany, what about Fenris, instead? I don’t know him very well, but he looks like he'd be useful in a fight.”

“He looks like he'd be useful for a few things,” Isabela says suggestively.

“Oh, uh, for now, how about just guarding our backs?” I say awkwardly.

“Spoilsport,” she says, fake pouting. “I'd let him 'guard' more than just my back. Are you blushing? But yeah, I'll ask him. I think he's bored up in that mansion of his anyway, with Hawke not around to stir things up. Meet me outside the city gates after your shift, then.” She tips her glass up, drinking the rest of the amber liquid down. She plunks it back on the counter, winks at me, and walks out the door. Like I said, I like her.

I finish up at the Hanged Man, and head home. Thanks to Bethany's gossiping, it appears everyone is already aware of my abilities. While I hadn't intended for that bit of information to get out, it also means there's no reason I have to go in my usual clothes. It feels good to get back in my leathers. Loose skirts trip me up too much, make it harder to fight. If I'd had my studded vest and greaves when I fought the templars, things might have gone differently. I strap into the familiar worn leather. It's a rich brown color with a hints of red, and smooth to the touch. I collect my favorite set of daggers, and set out.

They are all waiting outside the gates. Merrill is the first to spot me. “Elgar'nan, Norah, you look different,” she comments. The others turn.

“It's a good look,” Isabela says approvingly. I have the feeling she's considering if I would be 'useful' for things now.

Fenris just looks annoyed. “Can we get on with this now?” he asks. “We're wasting time. I assume you are ready.”

“Yes,” I say, and we set off together for the Wounded Coast.
Chapter Summary

As part of her plan to make friends with Hawke's inner circle, Norah goes to the Wounded Coast with Isabela, Fenris, and Merrill on a “simple job”. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 9: Milk Run

The Wounded Coast is known for being a haven to pirates, slavers, bandits, and more recently, the Tal-Vashoth, or Qunari deserters. They failed to mention how pretty it is. No really, it's quite breathtaking. The winding sandy paths are surrounded by rocky cliff sides, grassy hills, and the deep blue expanse of the sea. I can't see myself moving out here, but it's pleasant enough for an afternoon walk.

Merrill hasn't said a word since we left town. I fall back in stride with her, allowing Isabela and Fenris to take the lead.

“You're quieter than usual. Are you alright?” I ask. “I thought you wanted to come today.”

“Oh, no, I did. Just thinking. This isn't much like Sundermount, but it does make me a bit homesick,” she says. *Ah, so that's it.*

“I don't really know much about your clan,” I say, hoping to spark some interest in communication.

“I miss them,” she says. “My clan was my home for my whole life. Not like the alienage, although I'm finding my way around. A clan takes care of one another. Each person has a place, plays a part. Humans don't really have anything like that. They go about their lives all separate instead of being part of something.”

“Why did you leave?” I ask. I'd already heard a bit about this from conversations between her and Isabela at the Hanged Man, but no harm in keeping her going.

“I wanted to help my clan restore our history,” she explains. “That's what our stories tell us the gods want. That they will return when we have become what we once were. I had to come to Kirkwall to accomplish something I couldn't among my people. But I must admit, it's nice to see grass and trees again.”

I forget sometimes that she's used to living outdoors. I make a mental note to try to get her out more. Might do me some good, too. City life is all I have ever really known.

Fenris doesn't seem talkative, either. *Is that his personality? I don't really know him well enough to say.* I decide to try a polite opener.

“Thank you for coming with us, Fenris,” I start.
"I'm only here because Isabela agreed to forgive my debt," he explains curtly, shutting me down.

"Oh. Well, I'm still happy for your help anyway," I try again.

"Don't think I can't see what you're up to, woman," he says, enunciating his words carefully. "I know very well that you don't like Hawke, and now you're getting close with her friends while she's away. It's revolting."

"No, I don't like Hawke," I snap defensively. "I've never denied that, have I? Don't presume to know my feelings about other things."

"I know your type well enough, they were all over Minrathous--using lies and manipulations to get ahead. You're no different. Hawke is a good woman, better than most I've met. You'd be a fool to make an enemy of her."

"Hawke makes enemies all by herself, I don't have to do anything. I'm just trying to keep more people from having to pay for her mistakes."

Fenris stops and turns to glare at me, but Isabela interrupts him. "Were you two planning on bickering all day? We're nearly there."

I feel sheepish, and can feel my face flushing. I shouldn't let Fenris irritate me like that. Damn, he's more perceptive than I gave him credit for.

Hawke surrounds herself with skilled people. I wonder if she knows how lucky she is to have their loyalty.

I think back to my conversation with Cat. She wants me to experience happiness. Am I just being selfish by wanting that too? I still need Hawke to suffer, but when Isabela asked for my help, it felt nice. I like the idea of being needed, that my presence is wanted. It's new. Will they look at me with disgust like Fenris once they find out the truth? 'Become someone else for a while, but never let it become who you are,' my mentor always used to say. I need to keep reminding myself.

Even though his disdain for me is obvious, I can't help but respect Fenris. In a moment of honesty, I admit to myself that I want him to like me too. Maybe I just wish someone would talk about me the way he talks about Hawke. He's more guarded than Varric had been. I'd gotten lucky that Varric already thought he had me figured out. The tricks I've learned in the Game for pushing relationships aren't going to work with Fenris. I have no idea how to reach him. How can I understand what it would take to build trust for someone like him when I can't trust anyone either?

We reach the meeting place at last. The uphill climb levels out onto a small plateau, and there's an entrance to a cave to our right. The view is amazing from here. I had been lost in thought on the way up, but I realize something now. Speaking up, I ask, "Does anyone think it's strange that we haven't run into any trouble on the way here?"

"It's been very quiet," Fenris acknowledges, also looking around.

"We should be on the lookout for traps," suggests Isabela.

That should have been my suggestion. We search for a moment, and it's Isabela who spots one. "I've found one, but someone's already set it off," she reports.

I walk over near the entrance of the cave, and easily find the remnants she is talking about. They sit on top of the sand - that means this was triggered recently, as the high winds would have shifted some of the sand over top of it within hours. I stare at it in confusion.

"And we're sure we're at the right cave?" I wonder aloud.
“This is what the note said,” Isabela comments.

“Do you think they're running late?” Merrill asks.

Isabela shakes her head. “I don't think so, Kitten.”

“I know these caves,” Fenris adds. “Slavers used to use them as dens to store their 'cargo'. They've been mostly abandoned, but some are still in use.”

“I thought slavery was illegal in the Free Marches,” Merrill says.

“That's never stopped them before,” he replies.

“Just be careful,” I instruct. “If this cave has been used by both pirates and slavers, who knows what we'll find inside.”

I draw my daggers, and take the lead. I wait for a moment once we are inside and let my eyes adjust to the change in light. Torches are lit in the sconces, another indication that someone has been here recently. The entrance is a natural cave, but as we travel further in, the rock walls give way to carved stone and wooden planks.

I think about Hawke and her team in the Deep Roads, probably combing through similar terrain right now. I don't like it here at all. I feel the weight of the rock above me, like it could fall and crush me any minute. There is a tightness in my chest. *Hawke can keep the Deep Roads. Maybe she'll die down there and save me a load of trouble.* The air becomes more still as we move further down, and I can no longer smell the sea. We're going deeper underground.

There's enough room in this cave for us to walk two abreast. Isabella walks next to me, as the two of us are better at spotting traps than the others. We follow one tunnel for a while, and find a few more of the traps, all triggered or disarmed like the one at the entrance. *Curious. Speaking of curious,* I think. I glance to the side and see the familiar shimmer of Cat's outline. I'm happy she's able to come with us.

In the next section, we find the first corpse. Isabella runs over, examining the body.

“It's one of Luca's men. Poor bastard - looks like he had his throat cut,” she announces. She digs through his pockets and other belongings. She finishes by collecting a couple of rings from his fingers. I must have a disapproving expression, as she shrugs. “What? He's not using it anymore. It's not like you knew him.”

*Girl has a point,* I concede. We come to a door, which appears to open outward from where we are standing. I study the door and see no obvious traps from this side. I listen, but hear nothing. I gingerly swing the door open. No sound comes from the room, but the stench is like running into a wall. It has substance to it. Death is not a smell you forget.

This room is littered with corpses. Most are dressed the same as the man we had found before, outfitted in the black and red colors of Luca's men. A few here are different, in black clothing with blue sashes instead.

“I think someone ambushed the ambush,” I say into the silence.

Isabela chuckles. “Yeah, someone rudely came in and cut them up before I could,” she says, “but I don't know these men. They're not from any crew I ever sailed with, and I don't recognize their colors.”
“The others are probably ahead, we should move on,” is all Fenris says.

While Isabela and Merrill take a few minutes to collect more loot from the bodies, I search the rest of the room.

I find a trap that's still intact. It isn't complicated, just a simple pressure plate. The number of bodies and the amount of blood spilled in the room suggested the bulk of the fighting took place here. All those boots tromping around in the room, yet no one had triggered this trap? I reach down to disarm it, but remember my mentor's advice at the last second and pull my hands back. I look up. A metal contraption is suspended above me, covering a good portion of the room. It looks like a cage with metal bars but shorter on the sides. Sharp protrusions glisten in the torchlight. Ouch. That looks painful.

“And now they've used a trap to set a trap,” I comment. “Tread very carefully. Whoever these people are, they have a weird sense of humor.” I gesture toward the ceiling, and the others see the spiked cage.

We move on, more cautious now. The next few rooms are mostly empty, no bodies, only a few cobwebs. One has a set of small cages, long rusted. I glance at Fenris, but he is already heading toward the far side of the room. This must be where they held slaves back then.

Opening the next door reveals a wooden wall a few feet in. The passage turns and continues to the right. The floors are made of wooden planks as well, little more than a catwalk, really. This is different than the previous passageways, and I have a feeling we're close.

The wooden hallway widens into a room, which opens into another cave, this one much larger. Peering out into the cave quickly, we see there are men everywhere, dressed in the black coats with blue sashes. I count at least 20 on my first glance. They are all standing at attention, facing our direction.

In the middle of the room, a man is strapped to a small chair. I assume this must be Luca himself, as he is wearing the red and black colors of the dead men from the other room. A mountain of a man stands beside him, knife to his throat.

Off to the other side stands a smaller, but no less imposing figure. He is dressed a little better than the others, with silver thread running through his black coat, and his buttons are polished to a nice shine. His skin is a deep brown and he sports a scarf around his head. All in all, he looks very clean for having just cut through a pirate army. They are obviously ready and waiting for us, but don't immediately attack. We step warily down the stairs and onto the rock floor.

The leader flashes a dazzling smile as we approach. “Isabela,” he calls in a friendly tone. “It's been ages.”

“Marco, you salty bastard, is that you?” she asks, cracking a smile herself.

“You know this man?” Fenris asks, his hand still on the hilt of his claymore.

“It's been a long time,” she says quietly to us, then continues, “you used to run for Otto's crew; what's with the new colors?”

“There's been a change of players since you left Llomerryn,” he says, his eyes shifting. “We're, uh, under new management. Nearly everyone works for Talon now.”

“You mean Ianto, that Talon?” she asks, frowning.
“One and the same,” he says, and begins pacing back and forth. “Somehow, he's managed to take over one ship after another. He's got quite the fleet, although not as big as Castillon, of course. We came here after we heard this bird was singing too much and needed silencing,” he says, indicating Luca. “What a surprise to find that he was planning a meet with none other than Castillon's little pet.” Uh oh.

“Of course, since the Talon has such a large number of ships, there is always room for another trusty crew member,” he says, grinning widely. “What do you say, Isabela? Will you join me?”
Chapter Summary

The conclusion of Isabela's mission to the Wounded Coast. In the aftermath, Norah ends up with a new friend, and a lot of new questions.

Chapter Notes

Arrgh, here there be violence. No, seriously, there's pirate violence in this chapter LOL.

Chapter 10: Shifting Loyalties

Isabela doesn't say anything for a moment, her brow furrowed deeply in thought.

“Who's this Ianto?” I whisper.

“The worst of the worst,” she whispers back. “Slaver scum, brutal, not above torture, even of his own men. Everyone hated him, so damned if I know how he ever managed to become leader of a fleet of ships. I never wanted anything to do with him, but he's definitely not someone to be crossed.”

“Let's say I am interested,” Isabela speaks up, turning back to face Marco. “What's in it for me?”

He doesn't say anything, but motions Isabela over to where he stands. She moves to go to him, but Fenris steps in her way.

“What do you intend to do?” he asks.

“They want something, or they'd have attacked us already. No harm in hearing him out,” she says, stepping around him.

As she leaves to walk over, Fenris comments to us, “this will not end well. Prepare yourselves.” I nod in agreement.

Isabela and Marco meet in the middle and speak in low whispers. “So what's the catch?” Isabela asks. He says something in her ear. What I wouldn't give for a report from Cat right about now. I am sure she is here and listening in, but she can't risk telling me anything without giving herself away. Isabela throws a glance over her shoulder, her features confused. She backs up a few steps. “And if I refuse?”

“I could always hand you over to him,” he says, loud enough for us all to hear. “I'm sure Talon could find someone interested in a woman of your...talents,” he says, looking at Isabela in a way that makes my skin crawl. Isabela looks stunned for a moment, and doesn't make eye contact. Her face is
paler than usual.

“I can’t even hear you and I’ve heard enough,” I shout, grasping my daggers. “Isabela is not interested whatever you’re offering.”

She doesn’t move. *Come on, Isabela, tell me you’re not considering whatever this piece of shit has to say.*

“Now now, Little Flower, is that anyway to talk to your new master?” Marco asks mockingly, cocking his head to the side. Isabela remains silent. *Shit, this isn’t good.*

I bark back with, “I’m more interested in how you’ll talk with my dagger in your windpipe.” I glance over at Fenris and see an almost feral expression on his face. His tattoos glow a faint blue. I suspect my hunch about his origin had been correct. Fenris had been a slave, and he understands Marco’s comment all too well.

Fenris lets out a roar, and I have no further time to think as the fight is on. Isabela, mobile again, falls in next to me. I give her a questioning look and she winks back at me. We move in to take on Marco together. I feel a sense of relief. I’m still not sure what she was thinking there for a while, but she’s working with me now, at least. Fenris charges after the hulk of a man who had held the knife to Luca’s throat; the thug abandons his position by the chair to focus on Fenris in return. Merrill backs up a ways toward the entrance and is already coated in her earthen armor, staff in hand.

The others from Marco’s team circle us. I prepare myself for the attack to begin from from all sides, but they just stand there, watching. *Have they been instructed not to join in? Why?*

Marco is quick on his feet, and pretty good with the long cutlass he wields. Luckily, there are two of us. Sidestepping an attempt to slash at me, I neatly cut a slice into his forearm. Had he not been wearing his coat, the wound would have been deeper, but it’s enough to start a slow drip of blood. Meanwhile, Isabela disappears in a cloud of smoke, and reappears behind him. In a move of acrobatic grace, she sprints up his body, placing one foot on the back of his calf, another on the small of his back, and finally crouches on his shoulders, knees digging in. Her blade nearly slits his throat, but he throws her off just in time, receiving only a small nick.

He says something under his breath that I can't hear, but the word “bitch” is loud and clear. I laugh in delight, spinning away from him again. I realize I’m enjoying myself. I’m used to fighting alone, so coordinating attacks with a team is new and unfamiliar. It’s a bit confusing, really, learning how someone else moves and trying to match your timing to theirs.

But, a fight is a fight, and I allow myself to revel in it, throwing myself back into it with a flurry of blows. Soon, Marco is bleeding from many small cuts and gouges. His attacks become slower, fatigued. I look over and see the giant man Fenris was facing has been caught in some kind of tangled root snare that Merrill cast, and Fenris beheads him cleanly. The glow from his markings fades a bit. I can't imagine two more opposite people, but they make an effective team.

Marco sinks to his knees, and I step up toward him. “It's over, Marco; call off your dogs and you may leave here with your life,” I say. Merrill and Fenris are now moving toward us, providing further backup. The other men still haven’t moved, which is worrying me. Marco looks up, blood streaming from a cut on his head, spilling into one eye.

“They were never my men. All belongs to Talon, and is his to command,” he say slowly, pausing to spit out blood that had dripped into his mouth. His eyes stare into the distance. He pulls a smaller knife from a sheath on his side, and holds it to his torso. “As am I,” he says, thrusting the blade into his own chest. Horrified, I watch as he falls face down on the dirt floor of the cave.
Merrill starts reciting some kind of prayer in Elvish. I'd learned a little Elvish, enough to sometimes eavesdrop on the Dalish traders who sometimes came near Val Royeaux, but I was rusty. I make out that she is praying to Falon'Din, who I know is the god that guides the dead. I think I second her opinion. Maker have mercy.

Marco's men start filtering out of the room. One makes a move to grab Luca and take him with them, but Isabela steps forward, her daggers still covered in Marco's blood. "Oh no, you don't," she protests. "I came a long way for that little magpie. I'll make sure he goes to sleep after he tells me what I want to know. Talon won't care so long as it's taken care of." The pirate looks to one of the others, then gives a nod, and he lets go. They all file out, and we are left alone with the two dead pirates, and a sullen-looking Luca.

"Andraste's ass, Isabela, what was that about?" I exclaim. "I don't understand anything about what just happened. Why would he take his own life? Why didn't the others attack?"

"Those men are broken," says Fenris. "I don't know who this Talon is, but he has a thrall over them. It sounds like blood magic."

"No," Merrill starts. "I don't know what drove them, but I don't think it's blood magic. There's no mage here, anyway; it wouldn't work from a distance." I glance at her. Merrill knows about blood magic?

I frown at her in confusion, but she steels her features.

Isabela finally says, "He offered me a place on his crew, if I allowed you all to be taken. I assumed he meant as slaves, but this makes me question it." After a few seconds she adds, "Don't look at me like that Merrill, I didn't agree. I was just stalling."

"Then why did you look like someone had hit you?" I ask, remembering her stunned expression after speaking with Marco.

"He surprised me. I couldn't believe that was the same man I knew back then," she explains. "He used to be all fun and games, always down for a good time. Especially in bed. What the hell could Ianto have done to him to change him like that?" She shudders, imagining.

Luca is still sitting tied to the chair, eyes trained on us. "Will you just kill me already?" he asks, voice sounding defeated. "My men are gone, and I don't know where your damned relic is. I lied, alright? I figured if I killed you, Castillon would be happy with me and promote me. I never expected any of this."

"Wait," I say, stopping any of my companions before the could comply. "What's this information was Talon so worried would get out?"

He pales. "Damned if I know, I don't know anything! Only that the bastard has his people following him like a cult. I fear him a lot more than I fear you, or death. Just be done with it already."

Isabela hadn't mentioned that she was looking for a relic. She'd been a bit evasive, if I remember correctly. I consider asking her to let Luca go, but I know that Talon's men will find him eventually. We wouldn't really be helping him, and it would probably come back to bite Isabela. I turn my head as she completes the deed. The fewer risks to us, the better.

I smile a little at the thought of it...us.

We retrace our steps to the cave entrance. A storm had started while we were underground, and the rain is coming down in thick sheets when we emerge. It feels good on my face, and it helps to wash away some of the blood and dirt from before. I realize we're in for a long soggy walk home. I walk
behind the others for a while, enjoying the rain, even if it obscures some of the view.

“The wind's something fierce, isn't it?” Isabella asks, dropping back to walk next to me. “Reminds me of being at sea. The spray in your face, deck rocking beneath your feet, there's nothing better.” She reaches into her pouch and holds out her hand. “We didn't find much in the way of loot, but I want you to have this,” she says, dropping a small object in my hands. I look down and see it's a gold ring.

“Proposing already?” I ask, grinning.

She snorts. “Hardly, puss. Look, I just promised you something for this outing. I don't like owing people. It's got to be worth something.” She seems a bit uncomfortable.

“I was glad to do it,” I say. “I hadn't had a good fight in a while, I think I needed that.”

“You know what I like after a good fight?” Isabela asks.

“I bet I can guess,” I say sarcastically.

“And you'd be wrong,” she laughs. “I'm talking about a good meal. Something hearty, like a stew.”

My mouth is already watering at the thought. “That's the best idea I've heard all day. Merrill? Fenris? You coming with us?”

Merrill passes, mentioning something about hoping to study before it gets too dark. Fenris shocks me by accepting. *Maybe I am making some progress with him after all.* We walk back toward town, chatting amicably, unaware of the surprise that awaits us back in Kirkwall.
Norah and the crew get shocking news from Sebastian, and it leaves her back at odds with one of her new friends.

Trigger warning: Childhood abuse memories again :(  

Chapter 11: Running in Circles

The rain has stopped by the time we get back to the city gates. I'm not surprised; this seems to be my luck lately. I agree to stop by the Hanged Man after I go home to change. I can't exactly show up at the bar and show the rest of the patrons my armor anyway. Hawke's friends might be getting to know me better than most around here, but I'm still not that comfortable with the idea of everyone else seeing me like that.

Once I arrive home, I quickly clean my favorite daggers and set them back down. I'm already regretting leaving them, but they're too showy. I dress in my uniform and strap the smaller knives back under my skirts. Not completely defenseless, but I'm reminded of the fight with the templars. My nerves return a bit thinking that I'd needed Bethany's help to defeat them.

I decide not to reapply the makeup I normally wear. Isabela and Fenris have already seen my face without it in the rain. Maybe it doesn't really make that much of a difference, after all. I'd wanted to avoid detection when I got here, so I altered my features a bit with creative application of cosmetics. My plans are a little different now, and I don't need to hide from Hawke's friends anymore.

“Do you want to know what they were talking about?” asks Cat out of nowhere, startling me. I'd been so distracted thinking about meeting up with the others that I'd completely forgotten to talk to Cat.

“I'm sorry if I ignored you. Of course I do!” I say.

“He wasn't just offering her a place on his crew. He was offering her a ship of her own in exchange for you and the elves,” says Cat.

I give that some thought. I know Isabela. Captaining a ship is the thing she loves most in the world. You can barely have a conversation with her that she isn't bringing up something about her life at sea. But yet, she'd turned it down. I wonder what had led to her decision.

“Thanks Cat, you always pick up the most wonderful things,” I say gratefully. “I'm just going back to the Hanged Man for dinner with the others. You're welcome to come if you want, but I don't anticipate it being that eventful.” She fades again, and I leave.

It's full dark now, but I encounter no bandits or other problems in making the few turns through Lowtown toward the tavern. Opening the door, it looks like I'm the first one back, but there's someone standing in Isabela's usual place by the bar that I don't recognize. He stands out like a sore
thumb in this place, in shining white armor. He's good looking, with auburn hair and startlingly blue eyes, but he looks uncomfortable. His bow is strung at his back, and he paces back and forth in front of the bar.

"Are you sure you haven't seen them?" he asks of Corff, the bartender.

"I've told you already, they went out with Norah earlier today and haven't been back since," he explains. Shit, if that's who I think it is, I am so not prepared to meet him yet. Corff catches sight of me and points in my direction. "There she is now." Thanks, pal. I have to remember to get him back for that one. How had Corff learned about my outing with Isabela? Had he been listening in?

Instead, I replace my sour expression with what I hope is a friendly smile and walk over. Corff introduces him as Sebastian Vael.

"You were looking for me?" I ask in greeting.

"Where are they?" he asks pointedly.

"Isabela and the others, you mean?" I clarify, although I'm already aware that he is looking for them.

"Yes, it is imperative that I speak with them immediately," he says. Wow, he's quite formal, isn't he? I size him up a bit. I can't place the accent, but I know I haven't heard it much around here. So, not from Kirkwall. He stands stiffly, but his gaze doesn't waver. Confident, but proper. A noble, maybe? But what is a noble doing with Hawke's rag-tag crew?

"What is it? What's happened?" I ask, concerned. Maybe this is an opportunity. If I can convince him I want to help, maybe I won't have trouble getting on his good side. I don't know much, but from what I've heard of Sebastian, he's very devout and has close ties with the Chantry.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I don't know you. I would thank you to point me to them, however," he says, looking away.

"Don't be so cold, Bastian," Isabela says, coming in the door, with Fenris right behind her. "Norah's alright. What are you doing here?"

"I've asked you not to call me that. But I have news that can't wait," he says impatiently. However, he doesn't start speaking, and instead looks around nervously.

"Do you want to go to a private room?" I ask. "We have one open in the back." He nods, and I show them through the back hallways to the room I had used to eavesdrop on Hawke before. I shut the door behind us.

"It's Bethany," he says. "The templars took her today. I didn't find out until after, from Grand Cleric Elthina. She's at the Gallows already. I thought you would want to know."

My face falls. Bethany. The guilt weighs on me. Since the day we had fought together, I had come to like her. It was hard not to, honestly. She was kind in a way that not many were. I had known the templars were looking for her, had warned her. Maybe we should have secreted her out of the city, sent her deeper in hiding. I could have helped her with that, but I hadn't.

"Fasta vass, this was your doing," Fenris accuses angrily, his tone striking me as surely as if he had slapped me. "Was this your plan the whole time, to get us out of the city so you could strike at Hawke’s family?"

I'm furious. "You self-righteous ass, of course I didn't have anything to do with it! You think I'd
hand Bethany over to the templars? After I saved her from them?” I scoff, feeling a prickle of tears behind my eyes. *This isn't getting me anywhere.* “Fine, believe what you want. I've had enough of this.”

I stomp to the door, and turn, saying, “I like her too, you know.”

“Where are you going?” he demands.

“Isn’t it obvious? To find a way inside the Gallows, even if I have to do it by myself,” I vow. *I don't know how, but I have to see her.* I've heard horrors about Kirkwall's Circle, and she's been there most of a day already. *Maybe Cat will be able to find something. Or, if it comes to it, there is always one sure way they'll let me inside.* I look down at my hands. *No, I'll find a different way.*

“Wait...” says Sebastian. “How can I help?”

Fenris continues to glower at me, but stays, and we start to devise a plan. *If only we had access to the mage underground. Surely if anyone knows secret ways into the Gallows, it will be them.* It would explain how they are able to operate a lot of things the way they do. Unfortunately, none of my people are with them. *I wish Anders was here.* Funny, only a few days ago, I was scared of him, and now I want to see him again. He might have helped with this part.

None of the others have any contacts with the mages either. Sebastian, being close with the sisters at the Chantry, does know several of the templar recruits. This might be useful as a possible distraction, but I doubt new recruits will agree to help a mage run away. I can try my network, see if I can branch out, but I worry that it will take a while. *I need Cat on this.*

“I'm going to go talk to some of my people, see if I can't find someone who can find a better approach,” I say, already planning on finding a private place to talk to Cat. She can get into places I can't, and listen in on people that will stop talking if I show up.

I lie to the others, “Maybe my contacts can give me a good enough excuse to have business at the Gallows and they'll let me in. I probably won't get word until at least the morning, though.”

Isabela says something about working with a templar name Ser Thrask before, and that she has reason to believe he might be a good lead for helping an apostate. We agree that we will each work on our own ends, and we will send word to the others if we learn something.

I go to my safe house in Darktown. I know no one will disturb me there. Once I'm certain no one has followed me, I go inside and secure the door.

“Cat, I need you,” I call, but she is already next to me.

“I heard you talking about Bethany. You want me to go look for a way in?” She asks plainly.

“Maybe, but I may have a better idea first,” I say. “I've heard there is a woman on the docks who is part of the mage underground. She poses as a merchant during the day as a cover. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to pretend to go shop, chat her up, but if I can't get anything out of her myself, I'll need you to stick around and listen in for a while.”

“Listen in, got it...but are you sure you really want to do this?” she asks. “The Gallows? That's the place that your mother-”

I cut her off with, “I know, Cat. Trust me, I've run through a lot of scenarios in my head already on how this could go wrong. Hopefully I can sneak in and back out again without alerting the templars.”
“No magic, Norah,” she says. “Too risky”.

I nod in agreement. “Promise. I've been getting along without it so far.”

* * *

We leave at first light for the docks. I like traveling with just me and Cat, knowing she is there watching my back. It feels good, familiar. The woman is there, as the rumor had suggested. She's just setting up her stand for the day, and putting her wares on display. Her stand hosts a variety of items and trinkets. It's mostly junk, but it keeps up the appearance of a legitimate shop.

I approach, pretending to browse her selection. After a minute, I lean in, speaking in a low tone, “I don't suppose you know where to get something a little more exotic?” I ask.

“What exactly do you mean, serah?” questions the merchant.

“Well,” I said, looking around. “I was hoping I might find something like a...special quarterstaff.”

“My word, no, we don't carry such things,” she says, her protest sounding fake even to my untrained ears. She whispers, “Did you not see the templar by the stairs asking about rogue mages? No shop would be caught selling anything like that around here today. You're just trying to start trouble. Off with you.”

I turn and walk away. Cat will handle this. I think I might have been disappointed had it been that easy. I walk a ways and sit near the pier, watching the ships for a while. I look out over the waves at the Gallows. I can see “The Twins”, the large statues that are visible from most of Kirkwall. It looks so far away and impossible right now. And my mother had been in there. An uneasy feeling spreads in my stomach. Maker, I hoped I'm ready for this. I send a silent prayer to Andraste to guide me.

I'd made the mistake of calling Lady Colette ‘mother’ once when I was five. She'd slapped me. I'd done all I could to please her my entire life. I dressed the way she wanted, stood the way she wanted, spoke the way she wanted. I studied hard at all of my lessons. I don't know that I ever did anything that truly made her happy.

I wondered what would have been different if I had been able to grow up with my birth mother. Of course, that never would have been permitted. Maybe I would have been better off believing Colette's lies, that my birth mother never wanted me and abandoned me. The truth was far uglier. Damn you, Hawke. You and your mother took everything from me.
Chapter Summary

In which Norah and crew plan a break-in, and find a few things they didn't expect.

Chapter 12: Harrowing Revelations

Cat found gold by following the merchant for a while. Nothing came about from observing her conversations that day, but after leaving the stall around midday, she met up with a contact in secret; they exchanged packages, and Cat followed the contact afterwards. He entered an underground passageway through the sewers that led toward the Gallows. A cave system. Great. More time underground, feeling as though I'm about to be crushed. I'm already nervous enough, as an apostate mage about to voluntarily go inside the walls of the Circle.

I thank Cat for everything, as usual. I can't convince her to stay home, despite the danger. She says she wants to be with me if something interesting happens. I think she's more protective of these new emotions she's experiencing, but who knows? The green and gold glimmer is a happy reminder that my friend is with me.

I send word to Hawke's friends, and we're all to meet at Fenris's mansion in Hightown. I'm wearing my leathers again, freshly oiled after their drenching from the storm, and I feel the comfortable weight of my favorite daggers strapped to my back. I really should name them, I think. They've become like an extension of me lately. Cat's Claws maybe? I chuckle at the thought.

“Thrask is all talk,” Isabela is telling Sebastian as I walk in. “Says he couldn't risk helping us after Hawke let the Starkhaven mages escape. They were recaptured, of course, but nobody trusts him right now. He was able to give me a bit of information, though. He said Bethany faced something called a 'hollowing', but she's alright.”

“Harrowing,” I correct, joining the conversation. “It's a test all mages go through when they come of age. I suppose Bethany's was a bit overdue. It means she's a full member of the Circle now.” I breathe a sigh of relief. Bethany is a strong girl to have made it through her Harrowing. Oh, Starkhaven! That's it. That's where Sebastian's accent is from. I don't know much about it, but it's been bothering me that I couldn't place it.

“I've got us a way in,” I announce. “I couldn't get us any official business to get in the easy way, but I found an alternative. There's a passage in the sewers that runners for the mage underground use to get things in and out of the Gallows. I have no idea what waits on the other end, but it's a start.”

“Good work,” says Sebastian, and I glow at the praise.

“I hate that I can't go in with you. Bethany is my friend, too,” complains Merrill, who had joined us this time.

“It's an important job, guarding our exit,” I reassure her. “If this goes south, you're our last hope.”
“You're only trying to make me feel better,” she says, pouting a little, but smiles. “I know why I shouldn't go, being a mage, but it doesn't make it easier.”

Fenris hasn't said a word, he's just leaning against the wall, arms crossed across his chest, watching. At least he isn't giving me the death glare anymore. *I really wanted to hit him earlier. Okay, maybe I still do a little.*

We establish the plan. Fenris will be with me on this mission. *Not awkward at all.* Sebastian will distract the templars, and keep them out of the Gallows proper for a few minutes. Merrill will guard the exit on this end, making sure our escape route remains open. Isabela will stand lookout at the far end to alert us of any trouble, and Fenris and I will enter the Gallows itself and find Bethany.

I would have preferred to go in alone. Cat would have been a good asset in finding one mage in a Circle full of mages, but the look on Fenris's face tells me he still doesn't trust me enough to fly solo. Thus, our tense buddy duo. My chest feels tight already, and we haven't even gotten underground yet.

We decide it's best to go right away. Evening is settling in, the sunset casting a myriad of colors on the landscape, and shadows stretch from every corner. The fading light will make us a bit more difficult to see, and there are not likely to be as many people out and about.

I'm not sure about my lock picking skills should it come to that. That's one skill I can never quite get right, no matter how many times I practice. *I'll just hope that once inside the gates, the doors themselves won't be locked.***

Following Cat's instructions, I lead the way through Darktown. We stop at the entrance to the tunnel. Merrill sets up her position inside as sentinel. “I'll do this,” she says, “but you had better find Bethany.” I just give a slight bow of my head to indicate I understand, and go first into the darkness.

The passageway is narrow, sometimes forcing us to squeeze through sideways. *The mage underground uses this regularly?* Once inside, I continue to take the lead, as before, watching for traps. I don't see any, and I'm careful to look in all directions.

“Why are you going along with this, Fenris?” I ask. “I heard you believe mages belong inside the Circles.”

“I would be remiss in my duty to Hawke if I don’t learn how her sister fares, but I have no intention of helping with an escape.”

“Will you get in our way if we try?” I ask, attempting to clarify. He says nothing.

The tunnel opens up into a cavern. Faint light filters in from a moss-covered opening above. We stand on a flat ledge, with a sheer drop off the one side into darkness. I can hear the sound of running water, suggesting there is a stream, or even waterfall down below.

A wooden rope bridge crosses the gap between where we stand and the next rock ledge. It appears sturdy enough. I give it a few tugs, and it holds firm. I cross easily, and wait for the others.

On the far wall is the next passage, through another tight squeeze. We’re going to have to go through sideways, and this one looks a little longer than the last. I go first, followed by Fenris. We're only a few feet in when there is a trembling, and small rocks tumble down into the crevasse. I panic, frozen. I feel like my heart stops, then tries to break out of my chest. *I can't move.* I jump when Fenris puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you injured?” he asks.
It takes me a second to find my voice. “No, that's not it,” I say. My legs are shaking. _Not now, Norah. Try to breathe, remember my training._ But it isn't working this time. I can't seem to make myself move.

Then I feel a strange sensation. I look downward, and see that Fenris is grasping my hand.

“It's only a little further, it will to be alright. Slide your right foot over,” he instructs gently. I try, while continuing my attempts to calm my breathing. This time it works, and I'm able to move my foot slightly. We make our way, his warm hand still clasping mine, and finally, the tunnel opens up again.

Once free of the narrow space, I sink gratefully to my knees. When I finally catch my breath, I look up at him.

“How did you know to do that?” I ask.

“There is more than one kind of cage, but they all feel the same,” he explains.

“Thank you,” I say.

He looks like he wants to say more, but we're not given that chance as Isabela comes out of the narrow tunnel. She stretches, and seeing me on my knees near Fenris, she smiles a knowing smile. “Ooh, I hate when I miss the good parts. Go on, don't mind me,” she says.

I'm glad the cave is dim, as it hides my flushed cheeks. _Probably best not to acknowledge that._ I stand up, brush off my legs, and walk on, pointedly ignoring her as she attempts to goad me a few more times. Fenris seems unmoved by it all, but I glance back once and catch him smiling.

_He helped me._ That was unexpected. I had imagined him mocking or berating me for my moment of weakness, but he'd done the opposite. Fenris seems harsh and rough, but his actions just now...I'm not sure what to make of him.

We walk together the rest of the way. _How do the mages keep this tunnel a secret?_ There have been no traps along the way, no guards. At last, we see light ahead, and Isabela stops, taking up her position.

“I'm expecting your asses back within the hour. If I don't see you, I'm going in there,” she says.

Fenris goes first this time, and we exit the tunnel. It opens into an empty chamber, from what appears to be an unused fireplace. There are torches lit throughout the room, showing this room is used for something, but its purpose isn't clear. There are several doors, one to the left, one to the right, and two on the wall ahead of us. I look to Fenris. He points to the one on the left wall. I shrug indifferently and move to follow him.

He listens at the door, then opens it and goes through, leaving it open. I move to go through as well, but hear footfalls and the creaking of a door coming from the room ahead. Through the crack, I see Fenris ducking behind a stack of boxes next to the door. He looks back and shakes his head. I close the door, and hear the steps coming closer. _Damn, separated already._ I hurry across the empty room and enter the room on the far side, quickly, but quietly shutting the door behind me.

I'm in an office, but it's thankfully unoccupied at the moment. A large desk and chair take up most of the room. There is a window, but it is small. Looking at it, I can't imagine it letting in much light during the day. There are torches here, as well. A number of letters, papers, and scrolls of parchment are strewn across the desk.
I listen, and hear the footsteps enter the room I had been in, then leave again. I can't be sure which door they had used. *Did they go out one of the two doors on the side wall, or back in where Fenris was? I'd better stay put for a minute. Looks like I'm on my own for now. Time to get to business.*

“Cat,” I whisper softly. “It's your turn. See if you can help me find Bethany.” She does not fully materialize this time, but I can see a small mote of light that indicates where she is. She leaves under the other door. I start going through the papers on the desk. The first letter I see is addressed to First Enchanter Orsino. *Yikes, this must be his office. I'd better make this quick.* A quick search turns up no files on the mages, no letters about Bethany or the Hawke family. I'm not going to find anything helpful in here.

I go to the door Cat had used, and get close to listen in. It flies back, hitting me solidly in the face. A small yelp escapes me, and I fall backwards. The door opens slower this time, and an elf steps inside. He is wearing mage robes with a staff at his back. The staff is elaborate, with 3 branches each leading to a dragon's head carving. His gray hair is slicked back from his face. His face scrunches in anger.

“What are you doing, you can't-” he cuts off, seeing me. He leans in closer, looking confused, and asks, “Nadine?”

I feel my blood go cold.

“No, of course not,” he says, his voice calmer now. “Sorry, you just look so much like someone I used to know. Anyway, do you care to explain to me what you're doing in here?”

Having no better lie prepared, I go for sincerity. “My friend was taken by the templars yesterday. I just needed to see her, to know she's okay.” *Hopefully a mage will be sympathetic.*

“They wouldn't let me in, so I...” I purposely allow my voice to waver, suggesting strong emotions.

“You shouldn't be here,” he says firmly, but his gentle expression gives away his compassion. “You're talking about Bethany Hawke, right?” he asks and continues after seeing me nod in agreement, “She's fine, but she's resting now. She had her Harrowing this morning, but she did well. Hell, she made it look easy. Wait here, I'll get her for you. But try anything, and I'll call for the templars, got it?”

Once he steps out, I quietly open the other door--just in time to see Fenris re-enter the fireplace room from the door on the far side. I wave my hand quickly and gesture for him to join me. Once inside Orsino's study, I explain what's going on.

A moment later, Bethany enters. Her eyes widen when she sees me. “Norah!” she calls, and we embrace. She looks good. No bruises, no scrapes. The elf walks in behind her, and I see the faint glimmer again before the door is closed. *Welcome back, Cat. Looks like you found Bethany.*

The elf looks at Fenris, and sighs. “Another concerned friend?” he asks sarcastically. I shrug, smiling.

“You're alright then? You weren't harmed?” Fenris asks Bethany, concerned.

A sad look crosses her face, and she looks at us. “I turned myself in,” she explains. “I thought about the night that Norah and I fought together. I knew they'd come back eventually for me, and I didn't want to get my sister involved, or make things worse for everyone. It's better this way. The Circle isn't all that bad, either. The mages studying here, they've been kind enough so far. Orsino even says I might be able to help tutor the others.” She inclines her head toward the elf.
“Once we determine how much you learned from your father,” he responds.

*I can't very well ask if she wants to leave, not in front of the First Enchanter himself. That he even let us see her is a miracle.* I hug her again, and whisper in her ear, “Are you sure?”

She whispers back, “I’ll be alright”. We let go of each other again, and she speaks, her tone louder, “Oh, wait, I’ve written a letter for my sister and mother. Will you see that it gets delivered?”

“Anything,” I answer. She pulls an envelope out of her pocket and hands it to me. I tuck it away. “It's allowed then, we can correspond with Bethany?” I ask Orsino.

“I suppose, but I wouldn't advise trying to sneak back in,” he admonishes. “I've already got Knight Commander Meredith watching me closely enough as it is. I trust you know the way out?” He ushers Bethany back out of the door.

Fenris and I look at each other. “How did you convince him to do that?” He asks.

“I asked nicely,” I say.

“Fine. Don't tell me,” he says, clearly disbelieving me. He leads the way back into the exit room, and gestures toward the tunnel.

“No, really,” I protest, my voice growing softer as I crawl into the fireplace and back out to our escape route.
Isabela stands waiting for us just inside, and launches into about a dozen questions when she sees us calmly walking in. I leave it to Fenris to explain what had happened: our meeting with Orsino and seeing Bethany. My heart is still racing. Orsino had known my mother. He'd thought I was her for a minute. Had he made the connection?

My mother had been a mage in Kirkwall's Circle of Magi. She'd lived there most of her life, so it made sense that they would have known each other. He's about the same age she would have been, too. I wish I had been alone with him a while longer. It would have been nice to ask him some questions, but maybe it's better that I didn't. Who knows if he can be trusted?

We reach the long tight passage again. Fenris goes in first, and I follow. It's easier this time, but I still feel anxious. He doesn't reach for my hand again, but I notice that he doesn't move too far away from me, either. I enjoy that thought a little.

The rest of the trip goes smoothly, and before I know it, we reach Merrill at the entrance. Sebastian is with her, having exhausted his conversational skills with the templars already. We repeat the story of what happened again for their benefit.

“It's good that she went voluntarily,” says Sebastian once we finish. “The Chant of Light says that-”

“Forget the twice-blasted Chant, what was she thinking?” exclaims an exasperated Isabela. “We could have gotten her out of town or something.”

Merrill looks between the two of them. “Well don't ask me,” she says. “The Dalish don't even have Circles. We handle mages differently than you do. It's good that she's happy, though.” She adds this last bit in a quiet voice, and none of us can really argue with that point.

“Hawke's not going to like this,” Fenris says.

“You're probably right, but regardless there's nothing further to be done about it tonight,” I say, trying to finalize this evening's work. “We did what we could. We should all go get some rest.”

The others agree, and we separate for the evening. I notice Fenris is walking in the same direction as
me. His place is in Hightown; he should have gone the other direction by now. I pause, and he catches up with me.

“Is there a reason you're following me?” I ask.

“I wanted to speak with you alone,” he admits.

I have to give it to him, he doesn't mince words. I find his directness refreshing, if a little unnerving. I glance around, and see no one in our immediate area.

He shakes his head. “Not here. Will you come with me to Hightown?” he asks.

“It's been a long day, Fenris, and I'm tired,” I say honestly. I don't think I have the strength if he decides to start accusing me again. I remember Cat calling him grumpy, and I inwardly smile. It fits.

“Tomorrow then,” he says, inclining his head.

“Alright,” I agreed. I guess I do owe him for his help in the tunnel.

He leaves, headed back in the other direction. I walk the rest of the way home, chatting quietly to Cat about the day's adventure.

“I want to go back to the Circle,” Cat says. “There are a lot of new things I've never seen before. Orsino seems nice too. You should go back and ask him about your mother.”

“I don't think we'll have another opportunity. I definitely am not going back through that passageway ever again.” I recall the warmth of Fenris's hand as he held mine.

Cat and I arrive at home, and I stretch my shoulders. I really am sleepy. I empty my pockets and find both the letter from Bethany and the ring that Isabela had given me. I look fondly at Bethany's hand writing on the envelope. A letter for Hawke. I have the impulse to burn it, but I won't do that to Bethany. I don't have anything against her, although she does serve as another reminder of what my life could have been like if my mother hadn't been betrayed. I wonder for a moment what it must be like to have a sister.

I examine the ring. It's smaller than I thought it would be, given that it came from a man's hand. A magic ring, perhaps? It's simple, just a gold circle, no stones. There's writing inside the band. I squint, and am just able to make it out, but it doesn't appear to be in the common tongue. Valos Atredum. That looks like Dwarven maybe? I can ask one of my Carta friends if they can translate the phrase. For now, I really do need to get some sleep. I turn in for the night.

* * *

The next morning comes and I find myself standing in front of Fenris's door, nervous butterflies beating against the wall of my stomach. Am I supposed to knock? When I had arrived yesterday, everyone else had already been here, and we just sort of went in. I decide polite is probably better. I knock, and wait.

Fenris opens the door after a few moments. “Come in,” he says, and walks back inside, leaving the door open. I follow, gently closing the door behind me. I take a better look at the place, and I'm amazed at how luxurious it is. Dark floors shine, although it's been a long time since they've last been polished, and the interior is elaborately decorated with imported statues. I can see a heavy Tevinter influence. This mansion had been a showpiece at one point in its history. Fenris is lucky to have a place like this. I follow him up the stairs to the second floor, and into a room in the back. A fire is burning in the fireplace. He walks over to stand by it, the orange glow of the flames lighting his face.
Here goes nothing. I try to gather up my courage to say something, but Fenris ends up breaking the silence first.

“I owe you an apology,” he says, still staring into the fire. “I thought I knew what kind of person you were, but I was wrong. Without your skills yesterday, I doubt we would have been able to find Bethany.”

“No, I'm the one who nearly ruined everything when I panicked back there,” I say, pressured to keep talking. “Thank you again for what you did. If it hadn't been for you, I'd probably still be standing in that tunnel.” I feel a bit overwhelmed by the emotions even now, remembering.

“Can I ask you something?” he asks, tone soft. When I don't say no, he continues, “You don't have to answer if you don't want to. Did your tormentor keep you confined?”

I inhale sharply. “Among other things. How did you know that?”

“In Tevinter, fear is as effective a method of torture and control as any. I've seen a similar look on other faces long ago, but I am sorry that happened to you.”

Sympathy? Unexpected, and it felt like a punch in the gut. I don't think I can accept his kindness anymore under these pretenses.

“I see. And it's connected to what happened to you last night?” he asks, frowning.

I can only nod, stuck in the memory again. After a few moments, I'm able to speak again, reassuring him, “But it doesn't have to involve the rest of you. I have no intention of hurting you, or the others.”

“Norah, look around you,” he says, gesturing. “This home and everything in it belonged to the magister that was my tormentor. My living here is bait for his return so that I might rip his beating heart out of his chest. If I vilify you for wanting revenge, then the same must be said for me. I won't say I understand it. I know Hawke, and I don't believe she could be involved with anything like what you describe. I won't help you against Hawke, but I also saw your fear. Something did happen to you, I can’t deny that.”

“The magister, he hurt you then?” I ask.

“Oh yes, at every opportunity, although not always physically. Danarius called me his 'little wolf' and paraded me around like a prized pet. These markings were carved into my very skin. The pain of them haunts me even now. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't wish for his death.”

I let his statement settle in. “I understand. For what it's worth, I don't think you're a bad person, either, Fenris,” I say, looking at him. His eyes shine in the firelight. They're green, how did I not notice that before? My chest still feels tight, but there is also release of sorts. I'd just admitted
something to Fenris that I'd never told anyone before except Cat. Surprisingly, he not only doesn't hate me, he understands my need for vengeance. I can't help but smile, and the anxious feeling lets up a little.

“You're not what I expected,” I say, filling the silence.

“I suppose that's a compliment. On to a more pleasant topic, then?” he says, awkwardly trying to change the subject.

“Yes please,” I say. “Is that a bottle of aggregio parvali I see?”

“You've a fine eye,” he says, smiling approvingly.

“Well, when I'm not saving damsels in distress, I do have a day job in a tavern,” I say, and we both chuckle. “Is it too early in the day for a glass?”

“Never,” he says firmly, and starts pouring.
Chapter Summary

Norah gets an invitation that sparks memories of her time in Val Royeaux, and her main reason for wanting vengeance is revealed.

Chapter 14: A Return to Simpler Things

I leave Bethany's letter with Fenris. It will be safer in his keeping, anyway, far away from my burning impulses. To be fair, I'm happy that I don't have to see Hawke or Leandra to deliver it, either. Fenris will see it done.

The next couple of days are depressingly routine. I go to wait tables during my shift at the bar, get off work, meet and arrange a few things with the Friends of Red Jenny, chat with Cat about the day, sleep, and repeat.

I don't see much of Hawke's friends, either. Sebastian says something about looking into who hired the Flint Company to murder his family. I don't know much about it, but it sounds to me like he has his own need for vengeance. That makes him almost tolerable. I'm honestly relieved to be free of his company. He goes on about the Chant all day. I believe in Maker's Holy Bride as much as the next girl, but I don't know how Hawke puts up with the incessant lectures. Maker save me from born-again Andrastians.

Merrill has been cooping herself up in her home in the alienage. I've stopped by to ask her to come out to the bar for a meal a couple of times, but she keeps saying she'll come next time. I left food for her the last time, and she barely touched it. What's she up to in there that's so important?

Isabela has been absent from her usual place at the bar more and more. She told me before she left yesterday that she had some leads on the relic, as well as information about this Talon person that Marco had mentioned. I hope she's being careful. Then again, it is Isabela we're talking about, after all. I'm sure we'll have to handle it eventually. I'm not looking forward to it, anyone who can make their followers do what Marco had done scares the daylights out of me.

I hear even Fenris is keeping himself busy. He's delivering packages and doing various work around town for money. Squatting in Hightown may be glamorous, but I suppose food isn't free. He's promised to teach me to play chess some evening.

The thought occurs to me: I'm bored without them. Dare I say I miss them? Life just hasn't been as interesting without them around. When did these friendships stop being just a means to an end and start being important? I shake my head. I've resigned myself that it's only temporary, but Sophie would not have approved. In a way, I miss Sophie, too.

Cat likes the feelings, though. She's still with me, as always, so I'm not completely alone. She follows me around when I conduct Red Jenny business at night. I did finally get back at Corff for telling Sebastian who I was. A “friend” greased the floor by his station, and he's been walking with a
limp since yesterday. He'll recover, but hopefully he learned something.

Cat enjoys the pranks and simple efficiency that the Friends employ. When I started the network, I did it because I needed allies in a new city. I had been familiar with the organization in Orlais, and found out when I arrived that Kirkwall didn't have one. It was pretty easy, honestly. There are always disgruntled servants and such who want to stick it to the rich guy, so it wasn't hard to convince them to sign on. It mostly runs itself now, but I like knowing that I've connected these people into something bigger than they could be alone.

A chat with my friend Telun from the Carta helps me sort out the Dwarven phrase from my ring. According to her, it translates as “Favor of the Ancestors”. Sounds like the dwarves, alright. They're always talking about their ancestors in one way or another. I try the ring on my right hand. It fits perfectly, but nothing else happens. It's kind of pretty, but plain and subtle enough that even Norah the Barmaid can get away with wearing it in public. I don't want to take it off.

It's on the third day that the letter comes.

I get a few letters, sure. But none have the seal of the Chantry and flowing script on the envelope. I open it in a hurry. It's from First Enchanter Orsino. It reads:

Norah,

*It took some convincing, but your friend Bethany finally told me who you are. Don't worry, no one else knows you were here that night. Bethany is well, and sends her regards. I have a matter I would like to discuss with you at your earliest convenience. I request that you come meet me at my office in the Gallows. You have an official invitation this time, so you can use the front door.*

- O

Orsino wants to meet with me? This has to be about my mother. Cat will be happy for the chance to go back, but I'm worried. She and I will be on our own this time if we go. What if this is a trick to get me inside the Gallows and keep me there? I've spent enough of my life trapped, I'm not about to let someone do that to me again. I shudder at the memory.

The day I found out about my birth mother was the day I stopped caring about pleasing Lady Colette. I'd been at a party in Orlais. The galas of Val Royeaux are like nothing else in Thedas. The nobility were adorned in their finest silks and gilded masks that night, each trying to outshine the others. The effect was dazzling.

Naivete had no place among the wily nobles. You learned quickly to veil your true thoughts and speak in cryptic metaphors that leave your meaning open to interpretation. The Game was on, and I had learned from a master.

My aunt started bringing me to these things recently under the pretense of giving me my debut into high society. Being young, only sixteen at the time, I was still considered a child in many of their eyes. I'm fairly certain they weren't expecting such complexities from someone my age. I'd be expected to charm the nobles when introduced directly, as I had at the previous party, and then be mostly ignored during their adult conversations. Secrets are excellent currency in the great Game, and I'd been instructed to collect them for Lady Colette. Cat was here, too, but no one was the wiser, of course.
What I hadn't expected was to run into my old mentor, Sophie. I suppose I should have seen it coming. The bards of Orlais are well-known players in the Game. Sophie stood beside a dowager countess, apparently her escort for the evening. They traded whispers from the balcony as they watched the dancing. That is, until Sophie saw me.

She excused herself from the countess's side and came to me. “Norah,” she smiled. “I'm surprised to see you at such an event. Is Lady Colette in attendance?”

“Of course. I am far too young to be unchaperoned at a function such as this,” I said, both of us equally in our roles, faces forcibly pleasant. A passerby would have no idea our true meanings.

“Then perhaps you will allow me to accompany you for a moment?” she asked. She then added, “Until Lady Colette returns, of course.”

We walk together in companionable silence out into the garden terrace. She glanced around, and certain that no one was listening in, her expression changed. “Ooh, that woman. I knew she wouldn't follow my advice. You should be with others like yourself.”

“I think I'm doing alright by myself,” I commented, a little defensively.

“So you are,” she says, trailing off. “Lady Colette never lets go of anything easily. Like all of the old letters in her study. Oh, forgive me, I think I've said too much.” She grinned at me. “I really must be going, the countess is no doubt getting impatient for her refreshments.”

Bless Sophie. She'd been the one to give the answers I didn't even know I needed. As soon as we'd returned home the next day, I ransacked Colette's study. I found multiple letters from my mother, and learned what had really happened.

My mother had become pregnant in the Circle, and feared having the child taken away from her. She shared that she and her friend Malcolm had a plan to escape the Gallows together, but the next letter was written by an emotional Nadine after Malcolm had left in the night without her.

There were no letters after that for a while, but I found one from the Knight-Commander. Not Meredith, of course. She had only recently taken over Kirkwall's Circle. This was from the previous Knight-Commander. He wrote to Colette, informing her that Nadine had been recaptured, but regrettably due to suspicion of blood magic, she had been put to death.

My aunt Colette had known what happened to my mother all along. She'd told me my mother didn't want me, had abandoned me. But my mother must have come to her after leaving the Circle, and had me while she was here. That would explain why there had been no letters for a long time before the Knight-Commander’s. I couldn’t think of another reason why I would have been left with Colette. The children of mages are generally given to the Chantry. It didn’t appear from the letter that the templars were aware of the pregnancy, so she must have stayed in hiding at least until I was born. How had the templars found her? I knew Colette would never tell me. It was a while yet before I left her side, but any trust I ever had in Lady Colette died that day.

My mother would still be alive if Malcolm and Leandra hadn't gotten pregnant with Hawke, hadn't gotten desperate. I might have grown up as Hawke had, living happily with my mother in the countryside, learning my magic from her at home instead of what I endured at the hands of Lady Colette. Hawke got the life that should have been mine, all at my mother's expense. I'll never forgive her for that.

Now Orsino is inviting me to walk right into the jaws of the place where my mother died. Still, the First Enchanter had broken the rules for us once when he allowed Fenris and I to visit with Bethany.
Maybe it will be okay.
A Morning Tea

Chapter Summary

Norah pays a visit to the Gallows

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Suicidal themes

Chapter 15: A Morning Tea

I can't believe I'm doing this. I must really be out of my mind to accept an invitation to the Circle of Magi. Cat is ecstatic, of course. She's been talking about getting back inside since we left. I'm not wearing my leathers or the awful uniform today. It's a nice break from my normal routine to dress like everyone else. I look down at my simple dress: plain, but of decent quality. I can feel the pressure of my short daggers against my legs a little more in this as the skirt isn't as wide as my uniform, but there was no way I was leaving home without them.

Perfect for a social call.

The boat ride over to the Circle is uneventful, but it's a pleasant morning, with sunny skies and a cool breeze blowing. After disembarking, I walk into the plaza at the Gallows and see the many merchants selling their wares. I don't have time to shop now, but I'm tempted to see what they have. Templar recruits stand ahead to my right, and their eyes seem to follow me. I guess I am a bit conspicuous here. Other than the vendors, most people are either wearing mage robes or templar armor. I pick up my pace a bit, in a hurry to be away from the templar hall and out of their scrutiny.

I reach the gates to the Gallows proper. I realize my mother must have made this same walk once when she was young. I can imagine the apprehension she must have been feeling, leaving her family for an uncertain future among people she didn't know. Glancing up, I see the portcullis is open. The guard stops me, but I tell him of my invitation and they give me no further trouble. In fact, they give me specific directions to Orsino's office.

I head up a long wide staircase into an upper floor of the inner courtyard. More steps lead up to the left and right. This place is confusing. Without that guard's instructions, I would have wandered all over the place before finding the right door. Fenris and I truly were lucky the other evening, we could have been here all night searching for Bethany.

Standing in front of the door, I run a hand over my dark hair, smoothing it down. I normally wear it pulled back into a ponytail while I'm working, but since I was dressing differently today anyway, I'd decided to wear it loose.

I knock, and clasp my hands in front of my body. Orsino opens the door quickly, and smiles. "You
came. I wasn't sure you would. Won't you come in?” he holds the door open and makes a bowing gesture, extending his arm in a motion for me to enter. My mouth turns upwards in a small nervous smile, and I walk through the door.

There is a chair in front of the desk, obviously meant for me. I take my place and sit there. He sits across the desk from me.

“It's not every day I get a summons from the First Enchanter,” I say.

“Just Orsino, please”, he says, then pauses. “I'm sorry, I'm usually more prepared than this. Ever since the night I found you here, there's been a thought in the back of my head that just won't go away. I need to ask you something.”

“I know,” I say. “Yes, Nadine was my mother.”

“As I suspected. Maker, I can't get over how much you look like her. It's like I've gone back in time twenty years.”

“Twenty-three, actually. I came here because I'd like to hear more about her. I don't have any memories of my mother.”

“Of course, you wouldn't have any, would you?” he asked wistfully. “Nadine and I were good friends. She was a sweet girl. Smart, and talented. She could charm you into anything, not unlike her daughter as I'm finding, but she was always a bit sensitive.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You have to understand, life in the Gallows isn't easy. We don't get to see our families much at all, and we're not allowed to marry. We make friends among the other mages, but it's lonely at times. So some of the mages seek company, sometimes from each other, and sometimes from the outside.

“Your mother wasn't the type to want casual relationships, but many are. Such things have to be done discreetly around here, as relationships are not permitted. Nadine was very trusting and sweet. She got her heart broken a time or two, but she always had Malcolm and I. We were there for her when something would go wrong. The three of us were inseparable.”

“You're speaking of Malcolm Hawke,” I say, unable to stop the anger from entering my voice.

“Yes; you must have heard about what happened, then,” he says, expression cautious.

I told him what I knew. “I know Malcolm had a plan to help her escape. They were going to leave together, but when he found out his lover Leandra was with child, he left my mother behind and ran off her instead. I know she left the Circle when she had me, but was captured later and put to death. They said she was a blood mage.”

“That's not exactly how it went,” he says hesitantly.

“I know Malcolm had a plan to help her escape. They were going to leave together, but when he found out his lover Leandra was with child, he left my mother behind and ran off her instead. I know she left the Circle when she had me, but was captured later and put to death. They said she was a blood mage.”

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“Your mother was suspected of blood magic, but I knew her. She was no blood mage,” he explains. “They were convinced that the only way she could have escaped was through blood magic or a deal with a demon. They were going to put her through the Rite of Tranquility.”

I gasp. *My mother, made Tranquil?* I couldn't imagine a worse fate for any mage. The Rite cuts off of a mage's contact with the Fade. They live, but they lose all of their passions and emotions,
becoming compliant and coldly rational.

“They wouldn’t let me in to see her,” Orsino says, voice heavy. “I wanted to help her, but she was already gone by the time anyone else got to her. She took her own life in that cell rather than be made Tranquil.”

“How can you be sure she wasn't guilty?” I ask.

“Because I know she how she got out of the Gallows, and it didn’t require any demons. Your father helped her.”

“Father? Then you know who my father is? None of mother's letters ever named him.”

“I believe so. Nadine was seeing a templar in secret. Well, he hadn't exactly been a templar for long, barely more than a recruit. His name was Ser Aron, and he loved your mother very much. If she was pregnant when she left, it had to be his.”

I exhale, immensely relieved. “I had the awful thought that Malcolm might have been my father.”

Orsino laughs a little. “No. Malcolm and I never would have touched Nadine. I think both of us knew if either of us had ended up with her, the other would have killed him. She was more like a little sister to us.”

“Then why didn't Malcolm help her?” I ask.

“I'm sure he wanted to. Malcolm left one night without talking to either one of us. I heard later that he earned a favor from the Grey Wardens; they helped him and Leandra get to Ferelden. His deal with them was probably a one-person thing.”

“Horseshit,” I said, not trying to hide the anger in my voice. “She was his friend. He should have found a way to take her with him.”

“She was my friend too, Norah, and I couldn't help her, either. We both failed Nadine.”

Orsino seemed genuinely sad about my mother, which cooled my temper a bit. “I want to hear the rest. You said my father helped her get out. How?”

“Ser Aron abandoned his post in the middle of the night, stole her phylactery and left with her. If your mother was alone when you were born, then I don't know what happened to Aron. I doubt he would have willingly left your mother's side, though. He was very devoted to her.”

“How did the templars find her, then, if they didn't have her phylactery?” I ask.

“That I don’t know. Maybe they stumbled onto them, maybe they took it back from Ser Aron. I just remember them marching her back in here about a year later. Most mages dream of escaping the Circle, but what happened to your mother that day helped me decide to stay. Someone needs to look out for them, to help them. I couldn't do that for Nadine, but now that I'm First Enchanter, I have some power, at least. Not that it seems to amount to much these days.”

I struggle to find words. My mother killed herself. If I were faced with being made Tranquil, of becoming emotionless, and most likely losing Cat, I probably would have made the same choice. I couldn't find it in me to blame her for it. Why hadn’t Malcolm kept his promise to her? Damn him.

“I think we’ve talked about sad things too long,” he says, voice gentle. “I have another question, if you would permit?”
“Of course,” I say, feeling hesitant. *If this goes badly, I can have Cat make him forget*, I remind myself.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend or are we going to keep pretending she’s not in the room?” he asks.

“What?” I ask, alarmed.

“I just finished telling you I was best friends with your mother. She was a proficient spirit mage. I also had to learn quite a bit to become First Enchanter. Did you think I wouldn’t recognize a spirit when it's right in front of me?”

I'm stunned. I have no idea what to say to that. *He can see Cat? Oh Maker, does he know about me then?* I have to fight the urge to stand up.

Cat's form shifts back into focus, a cheerful expression on her face, not concerned in the least. “I'm Cat,” she says playfully. “So you could see me the whole time?”

“Indeed, Miss Cat,” he says, grinning in response. “I'm pretty good at this game. You can call me Orsino.”

He turns to me and says, “Don’t worry, the templars aren’t going to show up and drag you off. I wouldn’t do that Nadine’s daughter.” I heave a sigh of relief, and he smiles. “It's no surprise that you inherited your mother's talent. Spirit isn't a very popular school of study, and even those who choose it don't always have a natural affinity. Most mages want to learn something showy, like fire spells. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course, but the spirit school is far more intricate. A lot of control is needed to resist the temptations that spirits or demons can possess. Has Cat been with you for a while?”

“About thirteen years,” I explain.

“I've never heard of a spirit living so long outside the Fade. Usually their essence starts to wane and they eventually cross back over the Veil,” he says. “Or become corrupted, of course,” he adds. He examines Cat more closely. “You're a remarkable friend to Norah.”

Cat responded, “Norah's a good friend to me too. She always makes sure we get to do fun things.”

“Oh,” I say as a thought comes to mind. “Now that the, er, 'Cat' is out of the bag, so to speak, can I ask you something about a spell?”

“Go on, I suspect you didn't get much of a formal training living outside the Circle. I'd be happy to answer what I can.”

“It was cast on me. It tingled, and I felt like I could run forever. Nothing slowed me down, at least until it ended. Do you know it?” I ask.

“Haste. It's an advanced spell, creation school of magic. Did you have any training in creation spells?” he questions.

“A little. I learned a healing spell, and a glyph or two,” I said, thinking back. Lady Colette had followed up on getting me a mage tutor. A horrible man from Tevinter, named Nikolaus. He always smelted of onions and was quick to anger, but I can't deny that I learned things from him. I was content casting healing and defensive magic, but Lady Colette wanted me to learn more than simple spirit and creation spells. Nothing was ever good enough for her. *I really hate that woman*.
Orsino nods. “Good, you have some basics, then. It would be difficult, but I believe you could learn it.”

“How?” I wondered aloud.

“Well, you could come to visit, at least when Meredith is busy other places, anyway. Your friend Bethany is proving to be good at instruction, and I believe she would take you as an apprentice. You’ll need somewhere to practice, of course, but the templars won’t pay any attention to a mage or two casting inside the walls.”

“You would do that for me?” I asked.

“Think of it more as a favor for a favor,” he said, eyes serious. I backed toward Cat, suddenly wary.

“No, your friend is safe from me,” he said, reassuring me. “This is about the other mages. I may ask you to deliver a package or go somewhere that I can’t. The Knight-Commander watches my movements constantly. I can’t always act directly.”

“Packages, I can do that,” I say cautiously, thinking about the Friends of Red Jenny and how we might benefit from this arrangement. “But I reserve the right to refuse any task that doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Fair enough,” he says, standing. “It’s been pleasant chatting with you, my dear, but I have to be getting back my work. Cat,” he says, bowing his head in acknowledgment.

Cat grinned, “I told you we needed to come back,” she bragged.

“Yes, yes, you were right,” I say to Cat. “Thank you Orsino, for telling me about my mother. I’d like to hear more about her sometime.”

“I’d like that. Good day, Norah.”
When Hawke returns from the Deep Roads, everything starts to change for Norah.

Chapter 16: Homecoming

My meeting with Orsino had been emotional, but in the end, I leave hopeful about things to come. Not only have I learned more of my mother, but I have a teacher now, and a powerful new contact. Not bad for a day's work if I do say so myself. Cat returns to her usual transparent form, and we walk back through the portcullis and into the plaza.

It's barely mid-day, and I don't have a shift today at the Hanged Man. I decide to spend a little time shopping before I board the ship back to the Kirkwall docks. I've never seen shops like these before. One is blatantly selling mage items. I don't have the courage to actually buy any, of course, but the robes and accessories are very appealing. Another shop offers potions and curatives. What must it feel like to be able to purchase these things without fear of the repercussions?

I make a small purchase of a health potion recipe. I think that's mundane enough not to arouse suspicion. I've never made my own potions before, but I suppose I could give it a go. It never hurts to be prepared. As I'm turning to leave and return to the ferry, I see a familiar face.

Anders is standing at the entrance to the plaza. His face is beaded with sweat, and his eyes dart around like a cornered wild animal. He hasn't seen me yet. I look for whoever must be threatening him, but I can't see anyone.

I step out from around a pillar to greet him. He makes eye contact with me, and visibly sags with relief. He strides over to me with purposeful steps, and before I know it, I'm being crushed in a tight embrace.

"Andraste's knickers, I'm glad you're alright," he says close to my ear, his voice choking with emotion.

I'm startled and confused by his unexpected reaction, but he's clearly upset about something. I put my arms gently around him in an attempt to comfort him. I'm careful to keep my voice low, but calmly say back, "Of course I'm alright. Anders, what happened?"

He immediately lets go of me. "I—do you mind if we get out of here?" he asks, his voice less emotional now, and there is a hint of something else. Confusion? No, maybe embarrassment. "Justice and I both hate this place," he finishes.

"I was just leaving anyway," I say, nodding.

Anders doesn't say anything else until the ship pulls away from the dock and we're safely headed back to Kirkwall.

The roar of the waves drowns out conversation from other passengers, and we're unlikely to be
overheard. He leans his forearms on a railing looking out over the water. I put my back to it and look up at him.

“Can you tell me about it now?” I prodded. He says something, but I can't make out of the words. I make a gesture toward my ear to let him know I didn't hear him. He moves over, closing the few feet of distance, and again speaks less than a foot away from my ear.

“Is this better?” he asks. My heart beats hard in my chest at his unanticipated closeness, but I manage to nod.

“It was Justice again,” he says, again gazing outward over the railing. “I returned this morning with Hawke from the Deep Roads. We went to see the others and Isabela told us about Bethany being taken. That was when I felt you again, as I had that one night in the alley, like a beacon. I followed it to the docks, and when I realized that you were inside the Gallows, I thought something horrible must have happened...” he trails off.

“What were you planning to do? Take on the whole of the templar army?” I ask.

“If I had to. I don't know. Justice doesn't always follow logic,” he explains disjointedly. “I'm sorry about before, when I...Maker, I always seem to do the wrong thing when it comes to you.”

“So I'm still 'keeping you guessing', huh?” I ask, grinning. “Good to know I haven't lost my touch. Varric would be disappointed.”

“I'm not sure I'll ever sort you out, but there is something different about you,” he says. I reflexively smooth a hand over my hair.


“For starters, I've never seen you smile like that before,” Anders says. “What happened while I was in the Deep Roads?”

“I made a few new friends,” I answer.

“Ah yes, the infamous Red Jenny,” he says grandly, and I can hear the smirk in his voice.

“Oh?” he asks, turning back to look at me. It had only been a few weeks since I last saw him, but he looks different. His hair is a bit longer now, and the sea breeze is blowing it forward to frame his face. It takes me a second to realize I'd been staring and hadn't responded to him. I turn away, a little embarrassed.

“Uh, thanks for coming today,” I say, smiling. “I may not have needed rescuing, but it's good to see you. I'm glad you made it back.”

“What were you doing in the Gallows anyway?” he asks.

“Talking the First Enchanter into being a Friend of Red Jenny, of course,” I say, my tone light.

“Now I know you're pulling my leg, but I'm glad it all turned out alright.”

“Welcome home, Anders.”
“Never thought I'd ever think of Kirkwall that way, but thanks.”

* * *

Once the boat docked, Anders and I went our separate ways. He hadn't been to sleep yet since his journey home, and Kirkwall's Red Jenny had work to do. But first, I had to change. It had been nice to shed the facade of Norah the Barmaid for a while, but I wasn't done with the role yet. It's how most of my Red Jenny contacts know me. I begrudgingly slip back into the uniform when I get home.

I imagine Hawke is probably at the Hanged Man celebrating with her companions. I don't really want to see her, not right after hearing what I had from Orsino. I practice my breathing and keep my reactions calm. Now that Anders is back from the Deep Roads, I have to be careful again. Norah's “giant Justice beacon” keeps giving me away.

I'm about to leave when Cat appears next to me. Odd, she usually does that as soon as I get home. “Hey Cat,” I say in a friendly tone. “Where have you been?”

“I was thinking,” she says, voice calm, almost solemn.

“What is it?” I ask.

“That other spirit. Anders calls him Justice, but I think he may already be losing his way,” she says.

“Turning into a demon you mean?” I ask.

“That's what you would call it, yes. I'd say Rage or Vengeance may be a better description for what he's becoming.”

I had a sinking sensation. “So it wasn't a need for justice that he's sensing in me at all, but my desire for vengeance?” I asked. I had worried as much.

“I'm sorry, Norah. It might not be a good idea to spend much time around him,” she says sadly.

“Why not?” I ask.

“Anders was the one in control when he showed up at the Gallows, but you've seen the spirit overwhelm him before. It's only a matter of time until it happens again, and if your pull on him is that strong, I think you could make it happen faster.”

“I'm a bad influence on Justice,” I say. I understand the truth of what she's saying, but my mood plummets.

I've been deluding myself. I thought I could enjoy my happiness temporarily and then return to my previous life, but it was never that simple. I'm not sure I want to go back to that life anymore, to give up feeling needed and go back to being alone, but maybe I have no choice.

“I'll be more careful,” I say.

Cat gives me a wistful smile, fades, and goes with me as I walk out the door. Time to get to work, I tell myself.

My work for the Friends of Red Jenny mostly consists on coordinating things, but I'm not the only one who does it. I receive packages, deliver them. Sometimes I get notes from others, or come up with my own ideas, then deliver the messages to those who will take action. With so many people
performing a similar function, it's remarkably easy to operate.

I finish my friendly errands quickly and I still have a little time before full dark. *Maybe I should peek my head in at the bar and see what's going on? Maybe I'll catch wind of something I can use later. Knowledge is power, after all.* I convince myself this is the only reason I'm going there on my day off.

The Hanged Man is in full swing that night, with boisterous voices audible from halfway down the street. *Good, a busy night. It shouldn't be too difficult to slip in and out without being noticed. Piece of cake.* Of course, that was never my luck.

“Norah!” calls out Corff from behind the bar. “I didn't expect you in today,” he says.

I shoot him a scathing look. He points one finger toward his injured leg and raises an eyebrow. *I guess he figured out I had something to do with greasing the floor. Damn it, Corff. Maybe he hasn't learned anything.*
Thanks to Corff’s untimely greeting, everyone is now alerted to my presence. I have no choice but to join them. Happily, I needn't have worried about Hawke. She isn't here. Isabela is, of course. I doubt she'd ever pass up an opportunity for free drinks. Next to her is Merrill. Fenris sits opposite them, and Varric is at the head of the table.

“If it isn't my favorite Cookie, I mean barmaid,” Varric says, a slight slur to his voice. In all my time here, I've never seen him drunk, and I'm a little taken aback. *Is he drinking to celebrate or drinking to forget something?*

“Hello to you too, Varric. Enjoying yourself, I see,” I comment, amused. *Either way, this ought to be interesting.*

“Varric was just telling us the story of the Deep Roads,” Merrill says, clearly interested in the tale.

“By all means, oh great Storymaster Tethras, do enlighten us,” I add, taking the seat next to Fenris. I wave to one of the barmaid working tonight and she brings me a mug of ale. My mood could stand a little improvement. I glance over at Corff, but he's busy talking with someone. I cautiously take a sip, and am relieved to taste nothing out of the ordinary. *At least he didn't mess with my drink.*

“It's no aggregio parvali, but it'll do,” I comment to Fenris. He smiles before turning back to Varric.

Varric really is a showman. Even though he's Maker-knows-how-many drinks in, he has the crowd enthralled. I'm sure the real story is much less dramatic, but he makes it sound exciting. Frozen ogres, a daring rescue, and an ancient thaig—all elements precisely timed to create anticipation for the next.

“There's only thing worse than giant spiders, and do you know what that is?” Varric asks of the group. I tilted my head, waiting for the response. “Baby spiders! Hundreds of them, pouring out of every crevice. I swear, if I never see a spider again it will be too soon. But then Hawke gets the idea...” he continues on. I've watched him work a crowd before, but usually not from this perspective. I sit back and enjoy the show. Once he has reached the end of his tale, he turns back to the group.
“It was wonderful, Varric,” gushed Merrill. I guess she's a fan.

“If you're so rich, then the next round's on you, then, right?” asks Isabela.

Varric looks at me. “What about you? What did you think? I should write about it, right?”

“I think someone already has,” I say. “It reminds me of a dwarven song I heard a long time ago.”

“Sing it, then,” he says plainly.

“What? No.”

“You can't just put it out there like that and not sing it. How else am I supposed to know if it's the same story?” he asks.

I sigh. I guess I had set myself up for this one. I haven't sung since leaving Orlais. The crowd starts chanting for me to sing. Giving in, I climb up on the table, and they all quiet. I remember the words, although thankfully they are in common, not Dwarven. I take a deep breath and begin, my voice low and smooth:

“Beneath the rock, they journey deep,
To seek the buried earthly keep
None have seen it, save they alone
No home for them, return to the stone

They travel low past fire's light
Through deepest dark and endless night
Never again see the ancestors' home
For they can only return to the stone”

I go to begin the third stanza when I look up and see Hawke and Anders standing just inside the doorway. My voice halts. “Sorry, I don't remember any more of it,” I say, looking down. I quickly scramble down to the floor.

Fenris takes me by the elbow, seemingly to help my balance as I climb down. He leans in to ask, “Are you alright?”

“I think I just need some air,” I say.

“I'll come with you,” he replies.
“I know a place, follow me,” I agree, and we walk together toward the back of the bar.

We pass Varric's suite and keep going. I stop at a door further down. It appears to be blocked with a mound of dirt, but I know it opens inward just fine. I step inside over the mound and once Fenris has entered, close the door behind us.

With the light from the hallway now gone, it's easy to tell why this room is not in use. A large hole in the ceiling lets in a feeble light from the moon and the glow from fires and torches throughout the city. It's been partially covered in oil cloth to keep out the rain, but not very effectively. There are no floorboards in the center of the room, exposing the ground below. A ladder is propped up against the side of the opening in the roof. Fenris lets out a surprised huff of air.

“After you,” he says, gesturing to the ladder.

“Um, no. The lady in a skirt does not go first.”

“Right. Sorry,” he says, running a hand over his silver hair. He grabs hold of the rungs and starts to ascend. I follow, doing the best I can in my work uniform.

We reach the top and Fenris helps pull me up to my feet. Lowtown may not be the most picturesque place in Kirkwall, but the view from the top of the Hanged Man is something to be seen. It sits at the edge of a ledge, with the docks stretching out below, and finally, the sea. The glow from the streets and other windows provides enough light to see by. The roof itself is flat, with a low wall about waist high.

“I never knew there was a place like this,” Fenris comments, taking it in.

“Not many do. It's where I come when I need to escape for a while. You can almost imagine that your problems are smaller too, like the people down there.”

“I can see how that might be a comforting perspective,” he says, nodding.

We stand by the far wall looking out at the city. I'm not sure what to say to Fenris. A few minutes pass.

“Downstairs, was it about Hawke?” he finally asks, breaking the silence.

“No...and yes,” I say uncertainly. “I've learned some things recently that make me question what I'm doing here.”

“What if I'm only getting them hurt in the end?”

“I think I understand your meaning,” he says. “When I first came to Kirkwall, all I could think about was finding Danarius. I had no qualms about using someone else to get to him. But then someone helped me. Yes, this is about Hawke. Do not worry, I won't keep talking about her. I hadn't asked for the help. Truly, each time you or one of the others are even seen with me, it puts you in danger from Danarius. After a time, I realized that the choice of whether to be involved or not is not mine to make, it's theirs.”
I mull this over for a few minutes.

“If you are worried, tell them. Let them decide if the risk is worth it,” he adds, pushing away from the wall and heading back toward the ladder.

“What about you?” I ask, reaching a hand to touch his arm. He startles a bit, but doesn't pull away.

“I wouldn't have stayed around you if I didn't think so,” he says, stopping to smile back at me. “You are an intriguing woman, Norah. I'm curious to see how you handle it all.”

I smiled. “Thanks. I think I'm ready to head back now.”

I go down the ladder first, and we return to the main area of the tavern.

Isabela sees us first. “Are you two already done sneaking off for your alone time? I'm a little disappointed in you Fenris, I imagined you'd take a lot longer,” she teases, stretching the last few words out a bit.

My face was in flames. “It wasn't like that!”

Fenris says, “Well, perhaps it was a little like that.”

“Fenris! Not you, too.” I playfully give him a gentle slap on the shoulder. Given that he's still wearing his armor, I doubt he even felt it, but he feigns that I've given him a grievous wound and backs off with a small chuckle.

“Ooh, I knew it!” Isabela exclaims. “Ever since that time I caught the two of you in that cave.”

“I can't win,” I say, shaking my head, determined to ignore their ribbing.

The rest of the party has been listening in intently, including the hated Hawke, but none more so than Anders. A look crosses his face. His brow furrows for a moment, then relaxes.

“What are you talking about?” he asks.

“Oh, that's right, Anders, you weren't there,” Isabela continues. “It happened the night we went to the Gallows to see Bethany.”

I interrupt her. “I hate to cut the evening short, but I've had a long day. I'm going to head home now,” I say, already heading for the exit.

“You take all the fun out of teasing you,” Isabela calls behind me.

“That was the point,” I retort back, but without any menace.
Anders immediately follows me out the door. I stop, allowing him to approach me. “What is it?” I ask.

His expression is unreadable. “I thought I'd walk you home,” he says awkwardly, and winces. “Alright, truthfully, I wanted to talk to you.”

I remember my conversation with Fenris. *Maybe I should tell him about my revenge against Hawke.*

“Yeah, we can do that,” I agree. I start toward my home in Lowtown. It isn't far, so I slow my steps a bit. Anders matches my pace.

“So...how do you know Fenris?” he asks.

“I told you, I've been making new friends lately,” I remind him.

“So I've heard,” he says, voice sarcastic.

“What's that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“It sounds like you and Fenris have become very close. I guess that's why you were smiling that way earlier.” He gives a wry chuckle. “I don't know what you see in him, but I suppose it's not my place to judge.”

“Will you just stop?” I say, exasperated. *Is he jealous? Isabela teases too much. I'm not with Fenris.*

“You're not? Then why did you two run out when Hawke and I got there?”

“Fenris was giving me some advice. It's complicated, but there are some things I want to tell you. Hopefully you'll still want to—” I say, halting in mid-sentence. We've reached my block, but there are three men outside of my door. I push Anders back into the shadows and out of sight.

“What is it?” he asks, tone suddenly shifting into concern.

“There are men in front of my place. I don't know who they are.” We both peek out from the shadows. The three men are all dressed the same, in dark livery. It looks of expensive make, definitely not something you'd normally see in Lowtown. One of them appears to be in charge, issuing orders to the others.

“This is right the place,” he announces, his Orlesian accent noticeable even at a distance. “Take your positions, men. She has to show up sometime.”

Anders looks at me, questioning. “Who are those men?”


“There's only three, and from the looks of them, we can handle them,” he says.

“No, there may be more than just these three. Let's get out of here for now.” He looks like he wants
to say more, but agrees. We hurry back the way we had come. Once we're a few blocks away again, Anders walks ahead of me, leading me. Where are we going?

He takes one of the side alleys near the Hanged Man, and we head down a narrow set of stairs toward Darktown. I follow him, and I realize he's going toward his clinic. It's deserted, the lantern outside cold. I suppose Anders hasn't had time yet to get back to his patients. Once the door is securely barred from the inside, Anders looks at me again. He doesn't say anything, just sits on one of the chairs, and waits. I remain standing, leaning against the wall near him.

“There's so much to explain, I'm not sure where to start,” I say. Am I ready for this?

“Can we start with why a group of fancy Orlesians would be looking for you?” he asks. “There's always so many secrets with you, Norah. I'm trying to be patient, but you say you want to tell me. So tell me, I'm listening.”

“I know. It's hard, trusting someone. Where I come from, secrets and lies are a way of life. I'm used to handling everything myself,” I say. “I was trying not to bring anyone else into my problems and get them hurt. That's what Fenris and I were talking about. He knows a bit more about my situation than you. But you're right, it's time I was honest with you. I warn you, this isn't a pretty tale, and you'll probably hate me when it's all over.”

Anders says nothing, but his confusion is clear. He turns up a hand in a motion for me to speak.

“It all begins with my mother, and my true reasons for coming to Kirkwall,” I start. Dropping my Kirkwall accent, I allow my natural Orlesian intonation to ring through. “My mother lived in the Free Marches, but I did not. Orlais was the only home I had ever known.”

His brows arch upward in surprise, but he's keeping true to his word and listening. Thank you for hearing me out, I think to myself. I return to the Kirkwall accent, now familiar to me after months of use.

“I was raised—if you can call it that—by my aunt. I was never treated like family by her, or even a child, really. I was merely an amusing diversion, a toy to be shaped and molded into what she wanted. I'll spare you the specifics, but life with her was horrible. Later, she turned me into her weapon. I cared for her in the beginning, but her cruelty and lies eventually killed any affection I had. She hid the details of my mother's death from me for most of my life. I finally found out the truth, and that's when the seed of hate was planted. Not just for her, but for the ones responsible for what happened to my mother. I couldn't allow them to ignore the consequences of their choices any longer.”

You're stalling, Norah. Just say it. I close my eyes for a moment before continuing, “Anders, I know the reason your spirit reacts to me. It's not justice my heart cries out for, but vengeance. Vengeance against Hawke and her family, for what they did to mine. I came to Kirkwall to find Hawke and see to it that she pays for her part in what happened.”

He frowns. “Justice is a spirit, a virtue. Not a demon.”

“You're forgetting that I've seen him, Anders,” I say. “I saw what it's like when he takes over.”

He's quiet for a moment, but doesn't say more. “Do the others know about you?” Anders asks finally. He doesn't look me in the eye, and I can't tell what he's thinking.

“Only Fenris. He knows about my desire for revenge against Hawke, and guessed a little of the rest.”

“And the reason you wanted to be friends with us was for this?” he asked accusingly.
“Only at first,” I admit. “Later, it became more than that.”

“Why haven't you done it then?” he asks, tone angry. “You've had all this time; surely you could have done whatever it was you planned by now. What are you waiting for?”

“I don't know. Maybe I was distracted. In the Game, no one can be trusted; everyone is out for themselves. There is no such thing as loyalty, or friendship. I think I just wanted to hold on to that feeling - of belonging - for as long as I could.”

His expression softens a bit. “Enough to give up on revenge?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I can't do that. What my mother went through, what she was forced to do as a result...no, it's unforgivable.”

“Justice's reactions to you tell me what you're saying is true, but I can't fathom Hawke having anything to do with this.” He looks sad. “Is there more you haven't told me?” he asks.

“Yes, but I've told you the worst of it. I still have my 'someone to protect'. That hasn't changed,” I say. “There is one more thing, though. I think it may be bad for Justice to be near me. I’m a bad influence. It's hard for me to keep my feelings about this quiet, as you've seen. I may not be a nice person, but I don't want to see you hurt because of it. I will understand if you decide you don't want to see me anymore.”

“Why would you even tell me this? What if I tell Hawke about you?” he asks, questions coming in quick succession.

“Being near me comes with risks. You should have a choice. The way things were, you didn't.”

“Risks like the men hunting you?” he asks, a bit quieter now.

“For starters. My aunt has a lot of money, power, and influence in Orlais. I assume those men were paid to find me and bring me back, but I'm never going back. If she's found me, though, things will only get more difficult from here on out.”

“I won't help you against Hawke,” he says definitively.

“I'm not asking you to,” I reassure him. “My deal with Hawke is personal.” I sigh. “Now you know.”

He stands, his jaw clenched, and he takes a step toward me.

“I should tell her, you know. I should be done with you and forget this whole thing ever happened,” he says. There is a pause, as though he meant to say more.

“But?” I ask.

“Don't you remember? I always do the wrong thing where you're concerned,” he gets out, and suddenly he's kissing me. His lips press against mine hard and demanding. I'm surprised, but my heart is racing.

He breaks off the kiss and I look into his golden eyes. “Mistake or no, I haven't been able to stop thinking about doing that since I found you in the Gallows today. Am I wrong in thinking you felt that moment on the boat too?” he asks.

My answer is to wrap my arms around him and kiss him. He stops holding back. My back hits the
wall hard, and he wraps one hand around my waist and the other grips the back of my head, tangling in my hair, holding me still. He pulls me tight up against him, and I give myself over to his mouth. A small gasp escapes me as he pulls my head to the side and trails his lips across my jaw and down to my neck.

“Wait, wait,” I say, trying to push him away a bit. He breaks our contact, face showing confusion, his eyes heavy with desire.

“Maybe we shouldn’t take this any further. What about Justice?” I ask.

“Justice is the one who keeps pulling me toward you. It’s too late for him to protest now.” He moves to kiss me again, but stops. “Unless you’re not sure?” He sobered a little at this thought, and pulls a bit more distance between us. “Forgive me, but I just assumed you’d done this before. You have, right?”

“I have, but only as part of the Game. Never with anyone I really wanted.”

“But you do want me?” he asks.

I realize I do. I nod.
Chapter Summary

My very first NSFW chapter *blush* If you're not comfortable with a moderate level of smut, you can skip this chapter. You won't miss much story-wise.

Chapter 19: Just Us

At my nod, Anders expels a sigh of relief. “Thank the Maker,” he says. “I'm not sure I have the will to stay away from you.” His embrace is gentler this time as he takes me in his arms. He leans his forehead against mine. “I'll do my best to make this good for you, especially since we are both choosing each other. Being with someone like me isn't without risk, either, but you already know that.”

I smile widely at his words, the thought making me happy. *Choosing each other; I like that idea.* His lips return to mine, this time sweeter, more searching. I return his unspoken need and deepen the kiss, tightening my grip on his robes, using one hand on his collar to pull him closer to me. I want to feel the warmth of his body against me again.

A small sound of pleasure comes from my mouth as I feel his hands move upward from my waist, his thumbs tracing circles on my back and sides. He stops kissing me to free my blouse from the waistband of my skirt.

He palms my breast through the shirt, and I feel my nipple harden against his hand. He's gentle, alternately cupping me and using his fingers in a curling motion to stroke the sides upward, before teasing my nipple again. His touch sends delicious sensations to the very core of me, and I feel myself already becoming wet. I meet his eyes and see his passion for me. In this moment, nothing else matters.

“I want to see you,” he says, and starts pulling my shirt over my head. I help him, raising my arms, as the fabric slides over them. My skirt quickly follows, and I'm standing in front of Anders in just a cloth chemise that falls just above my knees. It's more comfortable than a corset, and I hadn't been working that night, so I'd chosen something simple.

“So that's where you keep them,” he said, sounding amused. *My daggers, of course.* I laugh, reaching down to unstrap the sheaths from each thigh, and toss them aside.

Anders takes my hand and pulls me toward a back section of the room. I know from being here before that's where he sleeps. I shake my head, pulling out of his grasp. Confusion crosses his features again. “Not dressed like that, you don’t,” I joke, and get rewarded with a flash of a smile.

I reach for the buckles and ties of his robes, and his hands drop to his sides, allowing me to undress him. It takes me a moment to sort out the fastenings, but I'm eventually able to get them undone. His robe loosens, but his hands grip my arms, stopping me from pulling it open or doing anything more. He's more insistent this time as he grabs my hand, and we head back toward his bed, stopping just before it.
A pallet of furs and blankets might be a more appropriate description than bed, but I don't care. All I can see is him: the warmth of his gaze looking down at me, the surprising firmness of his chest peeking out where his robe parts. *Funny, I would have thought he would have been a bit thinner.* I snake an arm inside his clothing, pulling it open. I want to taste him. I lean up and place my lips on his collarbone, and he doesn't stop me this time. *Oh, he smells good.* I can't place the scent, but it's fresh. *Some kind of herb?* I graze my teeth on his shoulder, and he inhales sharply.

I'm distracted from my task as his hand slowly moves down my hip to my outer thigh. He drags his fingers upward, gathering the fabric with them, and then slides them over to find the top of my panties. His hand slips inside, and I moan deeply as he presses his fingers against me. “Sweet Norah, love, you're already so wet for me,” he murmurs, and I close my eyes as a finger dips inside and begins stroking my tender flesh.

I bite my lip and force my eyes open again. Anders's eyes are soft, unfocused, but he's intent on what he's doing between my thighs. I widen my stance to give him better access. A pressure is building inside me, and I gasp as the wave hits me. I nearly lose my balance, but I hold onto him as I shudder against him.

“Already? Huh, I guess some surprises aren't so bad after all,” he says, a deep chuckle coming from him. He brushes a feather-light kiss on my lips.

We make quick work of the rest of our clothing, and I recline on the bed. While not overly muscular, his lean frame seems well-toned. *Guess the Deep Roads were good to him.* He joins me, leaning on his side looking down at me. “You're beautiful,” he comments, returning his hands to my body. He bends down to capture my nipple in his mouth. I moan again.

My body is sensitive after the orgasm I just experienced, and each sensation feels multiplied. I stroke my fingers into his hair, and release it from the leather thong he had used to tie it back. He lets me, the silky blonde tendrils sliding through my fingers.

He raises up, pulling away from me, and sits back on his heels. “Come here,” he says, and I comply, crawling over to him. “Turn around,” he commands. He stays where he is. I assume he wants me on my hands and knees, but he surprises me by pulling my torso back up against him, my knees on either side of his.

Anders's lips caress the column of my neck again, and I can't help but whimper in pleasure. “Maker, you're so responsive. I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing those adorable noises you're making right now.” *Hearing him say such things in my ear...Maker, indeed.* One of his hands finds my breast again, while the other returns between my legs, stroking my nub. The touch makes me gasp.

“Norah, love, I don't think I can wait anymore,” he says, and I feel him rubbing the head of his cock against my folds. I open my knees a little wider, and I feel him start to slide inside me. He pulls back and thrusts in again, filling me completely. I throw my head back against his shoulder and cry out.

Grabbing my hips, he pulls me harder down onto him, and I feel his entire length. “Mine,” he growls in my ear, low in his throat, and in that moment, I couldn't agree more. I'm overtaken by the pressure, and I climax again. “Yes, love, that's it. Come for me.”

Once my breathing slows a little again, he pushes me forward down on to the bed, my shoulders low against the blankets, but he doesn't pull out of me. He begins thrusting in earnest, and I'm drowning, lost, uncontrollably crying out his name over and over.

I feel him shift as he leans over my back, his fingers sliding downward to grasp my hips tightly, and he says, “I'm close, love.” *Maker help me, so am I.* His movements become jerkier, less rhythmic,
and I hear him groan. The pulsing inside me as he releases his seed sends me over the edge, and I come again, calling out his name one last time as the intensity hits me.

After a few moments, he moves away from me. He lies down on the blankets, and gathers me to his chest. I can hear his heartbeat, and it's as fast as mine is right now. I feel a chill, and shiver. Anders gathers the blankets around the both of us.

“Sweet Norah, do you always do that? The multiple times thing, I mean,” he says.

“Um, no that was a first for me,” I admit with a small chuckle. He beams at me, clearly proud of himself. Feeling a little embarrassed, I bury my face in his shoulder. I hope I get the chance to find out if we can manage it again, but I realize I don't know what his intentions are long term. I look up at him. “Anders,” I begin, but he silences me with a shake of his head.

His hand slides up my jaw and his thumb caresses my kiss-swollen mouth. “As much I adore hearing my name from your lips, love, don't. There will be plenty of time to overthink things tomorrow. For now, I just want to enjoy having you here. Stay the night,” he says. It sounds more like a plea than a demand. I settle back in next to him and give him a squeeze in response. He plants a gentle kiss on the top of my head and holds me close.

His breathing evens out and becomes deeper after a few minutes, and I feel my own eyes growing heavy. I fall into a peaceful sleep at his side.

That is, of course, until the nightmares start.
Things look different for Norah the next morning, and she's forced to come face-to-face with elements from her past.

I'm jostled awake by movement next to me. Anders's body is tense, but a glance at his face tells me he's still asleep. I push myself up to rest on my arm and watch him. He's sweating, his head rolling back and forth slowly, and he starts to mutter something. Leaning in, I make out the word “no” but the rest is incoherent.

I gently touch his shoulder. “Anders, are you alright?” He doesn't wake. I nudge him a bit harder, and his eyes open, as he gasps for breath. He looks around, confused for a minute, but settles on me. I repeat, “Are you alright? You were talking in your sleep.”

He looks away, and after a moment says, “Nightmares. Perks of being a Grey Warden.”

I tense. “You're a Grey Warden?” I ask, suddenly alarmed, remembering Malcolm's “deal” with them. He's way too young for that. I relax after that thought.

“Yeah, but what went through your head just now?” he asks.

I sigh. “The Grey Wardens also have something to do with what happened to my mother. But I realized the timing is all off. You're not much older than me, so there's no way you could have been involved back then. Sorry, it just put me on edge for a minute. So, about these nightmares?” I say awkwardly, trying to shift the subject back away from me.

“Being a Warden isn't just about choosing to sign up,” he explains. “There's this ritual they put you through that lets you sense the Darkspawn. Downside is, you get horrible nightmares about them. It's supposed to be worse during a Blight, but thankfully, the Hero of Ferelden didn't recruit me until after she slew the Archdemon.”

“You know the Hero of Ferelden?” I ask, impressed. “Even I've heard about her.”

“She's an amazing person. The stories about her don't lie one bit,” he says, yawning.

“Why don't you try to go back to sleep?” I suggest.

“I'm not sure I can after that,” he admits.

I shift positions so I'm sitting up against the wall, one leg propped up, and motion for him to lean up against me. He looks at me for a moment.

“You know, I thought the bandages might have been my favorite look, but seeing you wrapped in
my blankets is even better,” he grins.

My cheeks flush, and I hit him with a nearby pillow. “You're a healer - you weren't supposed to notice things like that!”

“I'm still a man, love.” He gives me a quick kiss, then settles in at an angle, his head ending up resting between my propped leg and my chest. He smiles up at me. “Oh, another perk of the Grey Warden thing is that conceiving a child isn't very likely, in case you were worried.”

“I...hadn’t even thought about that. I used to take herbs back in Val Royeaux, but it’s been a long time since I needed such things. Thank you for telling me,” I say. I stroke his hair, my fingers brushing it away from his face. He closes his eyes, seeming to enjoy being touched.

I hum a song I'd learned when I was younger.

“Mm, I love your voice. Sad I missed most of your performance earlier,” Anders says.

“Hush you; you're supposed to be relaxing,” I admonish, and keep humming the quiet tune. It takes a while, but eventually Anders's weight becomes heavier and I know he's asleep again. The rest of the night passes easily.

* * *

I awake the next morning in a different position. I don't even remember falling asleep. Anders isn't next to me in the bed, but I locate him on the other side of the room. He’s fully dressed, leaning over a table looking at some kind of papers. I realize most of my clothes are still across the room, but my chemise is nearby. I quickly grab it and pull it over my head.

The pads of my feet make no sound as I make my way over him. “Good morning,” I say, curling an arm around his waist as I lean over to see what he is looking at. It appears to be messages he received while he was away. He turns to look back at me. He smiles, but his face is cautious.

“No regrets, then, about last night?” he asks.

“None.”

“Good. I'm not ready for this to end yet,” he says, exhaling a breath, and kissing me on the forehead.

“Me either,” I admit, relieved that he’s bringing it up first. “But you're sure, about Justice?” I ask hesitantly.

“Justice will have to live with it. To be fair, I doubt I'd even have met you if it weren't for him,” he explains. “But if we're going to continue to see each other, I do have one condition,” he continues, tone turning serious.

“And that is?” I ask anxiously.

“I get to be the one to tell Fenris,” he says, a smile widening on his face.

I roll my eyes. “I told you, we aren't like that,” I remind him.

“Norah, love, you didn't see the way he was looking at you. No, I'm going to enjoy seeing the look on his face when he finds out.”

“So you were jealous,” I say, shaking my head. “I wondered why you were so angry about me leaving the bar with him last night.”
“It’s odd; I don’t know that I’ve ever felt jealous over anyone before. In the Circle, liaisons are quick and casual. Not many attachments. Is it strange that I like this feeling?”

I shrug. “Probably,” I tease, and he tickles me, laughing. He kisses me hard, but it quickly softens into a much gentler pressure.

When he pulls away, he looks again at his messages. “Now that I’m back, there’s so much to do. As much as I’d love to spend the day with you, I think I need to get back to work.”

“Same here,” I say, “I need to get back to her.”

“Your ‘person to protect’?” he asks. “Will you tell me about her now?”

“I can’t. I’m sorry,” I say, frowning. “Shit! The men at my house. I can’t just go home,” I say. *How had I gotten so distracted that I had forgotten about it?*

“Right, of course,” he said. Obviously it had slipped his mind as well. He looks thoughtful, before replying, “What about asking Aveline?”

“The guard-captain? I didn't get a chance to know her before you all left for the Deep Roads. She wouldn't have any reason to help me.”

“What if I ask her?” he suggests.

“Really? But what will you tell her about who those men are?”

“She's probably heard enough about you from Varric and the others to know that you're a friend. We can just tell her that you ran into some trouble, and these men are harassing you. She's helped Hawke with plenty of things before with less information.”

“Yeah, but that's Hawke,” I protest.

“Just let me ask her.”

* * *

I end up with an escort to my place, after all. Anders stays behind, but—much to my surprise—Aveline does agree to go with me, and brings Varric and Isabela with her. Watching Aveline and Isabela together, it is clear that the two of them don't exactly get along. I’m relieved, as this means Isabela's teasing is targeted at the guard-captain this morning instead of me. I don't think I'm ready to face her when she finds out what happened last night with Anders.

I'm still dressed in my clothes from the night before. I wasn't able to stop by my safe house to change, as I haven't been alone yet this morning. Thankfully, I'd been able to borrow a longer set of daggers from Isabela so I wasn’t limited to my short ones this time around. *She has good taste in weaponry,* I think, admiring them. Long and straight, with a comfortable grip.

I also haven't had an opportunity to check in with Cat. *I wonder how long she was around last night. No, surely she would have given us some privacy. Of course, I guess Justice witnessed everything. I blush at the thought. I glance over at Varric and find him giving me a strange look. Does he know something?*

Arriving, I see that the same three men are still stationed outside my place, but they're looking a little worse for wear after a night guarding my place. This helps reassure me that it’s probably are only the three of them. They no doubt would have taken shifts and been more refreshed if there had been
more.

I decide to let Aveline try to handle this, and prepare myself for the inevitable questions that will follow. For once, I'm happy to see her shiny armor. *It really does make an impression.*

“You men have no business here; you need to leave at once,” she says, stepping out in front of me and the others.

“Oh, but we do. We have business with that woman behind you. We would prefer not to start trouble with the local guard, but our orders are to escort her safely home to her mother. Step aside,” says the leader.

I sigh. *I knew this wasn't going to be easy.* “I've got this Aveline,” I say as I move up to stand next to her. “Just back me up if this doesn't end well, alright?”

I face the leader calmly. “I have no intention of going anywhere with you. That woman is *not* my mother. You will return to her and tell her that I have no interest in any further contact from her.”

He shakes his head. “It is regrettable, but I'm afraid we have no choice but to take you home, regardless.”

“No in my city, you don't,” announces Aveline, drawing her sword.

*Good,* I think. I had hoped they wouldn't just leave. I really don't want these men returning home to Lady Colette and telling her about me. *But what have they already told her? How did they know where to find me in the first place?*

I unsheathe the borrowed set of daggers, taking my stance. Looking over, I notice Isabela and Varric also preparing for a confrontation. I've never seen Varric holding his crossbow before. It really is a beautiful piece of craftsmanship.

The leader barks an order to his men, and they fan out into an offensive formation. The leader himself draws a long thin saber, pointing it up at an angle as his own feet step apart. The others are wielding what look like shortswords of some kind.

The leader makes a lunge at Aveline, which she easily deflects with her shield. I try to engage the man on the right, but he dodges around me and goes after Isabela, instead. *They're trying not to hurt me. Good thing I don't have the same reservation.* With a twist, I aim low, and slash the man across the calf. Their livery does appear to be reinforced a little more than regular cloth, but doesn't offer too much resistance and a large section of muscle gives way.

He raises the injured leg, leaning heavily on the healthy one. Isabela takes advantage of his momentary distraction to ram one of her long daggers upward under his chin and into the soft flesh inside. He falls over, flailing in attempt to stand. But with one leg useless, and a pool of his own blood rapidly forming underneath him, his movements only cause him to slip and bleed out quicker.

Aveline seems to be holding her own fine with the leader. His style is fast and flashy, but ill-suited for fighting someone with a shield and armor. She thrusts the shield forward, using the momentum to knock him over. Isabela goes in to help with the kill, so I head over to Varric.

He's backed up from the fight a distance, and appears to be reloading his crossbow. “Come on Bianca, now's not the time to be shy,” he says. I move in behind the Orlesian man and stab him in the back with both daggers. Looking around his body, I see Varric pull the trigger just in time to duck out of the way. The crossbow bolt goes cleanly through the man and part of the way out of his back, right between my blades. It would have hit me, too, if I hadn’t moved.
The Orlesian man falls face forward into the dirt, gasping for a breath he'll never get. Varric looks at me sheepishly. I shake my head as I put a foot on the man's back and retrieve my weapons.

The fight is over quickly.

“Maker, what a mess,” says Varric, returning to stand next to us. He looks down at the leader. “From his style, I'd say this man had training as a Chevalier. Cookie, I'm starting to think I should be writing a book about you. You clearly made a powerful enemy if they sent these guys after you.”

“Tell me about it,” I said sarcastically. I turn to Aveline and apologize, “Sorry to pull you into a personal matter.”

“No, you were right to,” she says. “These men wanted trouble. They could just have left and reported back.”

I smile. Her support is unexpected. She's the last of Hawke’s friends, and arguably the most loyal. I expected to have a hard time with her, but she isn't so bad, really.

“I don't suppose you want to tell us what that was all about?” Aveline asks.

“The skills I have, I learned in Orlais,” I say, gesturing toward the daggers I am still holding. *I hope a little information will get me a long way here.* “The patron who sponsored me wanted more from me than I was willing to give, so I left. It appears my past is catching up with me.”

“Can we expect more, then?” she asked, frowning.

“Maybe. My patron is a wealthy and influential woman. She may try again.”

“Let me know. I can send a patrol if they bother you again.”

“Just like that?” I ask, incredulous.

“No one kidnaps people in my city if I have anything to say about it,” she says. *Close enough, I suppose.* I smile at her.

“Thanks.”
Chapter Summary

Norah and Cat have a disagreement, and Norah questions things.

Chapter 21: Connections

Entering my home and looking around, I find no evidence that the men had been inside. I thank Aveline and the others, and I agree to buy them a pint later during my day shift at the Hanged Man. Varric gives me a long last look before leaving with the others. He wants to say something. I guess I'll find out what he wants sooner or later.

It's good to be home. I shut and lock the door once everyone is gone, and I call for Cat. After a moment, she appears. Her face is grim, her childlike lips pressed into a firm line.

“You did exactly the opposite of what I said,” she says, her voice taking a harsh tone. “I told you about the spirit, and you went to him anyway.”


“You know who else gives choices? Demons, Norah,” she says, her face grimacing, then softening. “I'm not really angry with you. I felt your happiness when he chose to stay with you. I just don't like the thought that something bad will happen to you and the feelings will go away.”

I've said I never wanted to hurt Cat, but I have the feeling that I am hurting her. We never had any fights like this until I came to Kirkwall. I need to think about my friend more. I apologize, “I'm sorry, Cat. I don't want to lose our friendship, either. Will you stay?” She nods.

I clean up and change clothes for the day. I don't really feel like working, but Norah the Barmaid has a job to keep up. I sigh, and head in for the day. At least Aveline and the others are coming later. It's something to look forward to.

There aren't many people in the tavern today, and work seems to drag on forever. Corff can't resist teasing me about my “musical debut” last night. He says he should hire me to entertain. No thanks. The attention is strange, both from Corff and the few other customers. More people know me by name now, and it makes me long for the days when I was invisible. Well, when Norah the Barmaid was invisible anyway. Red Jenny wouldn't get nearly as much accomplished if nobody knew me. I think I'm still working on “just Norah”. When did life get so complicated?

The day finally winds down and I'm getting ready to finish my shift when Varric and the rest show up. Merrill has joined them, but thankfully no Hawke. Aveline mentions something about her setting up her new mansion in Hightown. That's right, Hawke's a wealthy woman now. Fenris and Anders are also missing from the group. I'll admit, I miss Anders already, but it's probably better this way. I don't know if he's had a chance to talk to Fenris yet.

I get them settled in at a table, and bring the drinks I had promised them for helping me. I treat Merrill as well, even though she wasn't there this morning. She looks like she could use it right about now.
Her eyes are ringed with dark circles, and I can tell she hasn't slept well in some time. *When was the last time I saw her, anyway?*

“Merrill, I'm so glad you could make it tonight,” I say, showing my enthusiasm.

“I insisted,” says Varric. “Daisy here's been cooped up far too long. I keep telling her, flowers need sunshine in order to grow.”

“But you invited me out in the evening. I don't think that's how it works,” Merrill said.

“Well then, I'll have remember to take you the next time I'm going outside the city again,” I say to her.

“Funny you should mention that,” interjects Isabela. “I’ve been looking into a lead on Talon and I may have something soon. I'm meeting with someone tomorrow who says he had a run-in with Talon’s crew. I'll need your help again if this pans out.”

“Isn't the meeting itself dangerous?” I ask.

“Yes, which is why I'm meeting my contact in the Lowtown market during the day,” she explains. “Don't worry, I'm a big girl, I can handle this part. I'll let you know what I find out.”

Merrill has a hand on her glass, but I notice she hasn't taken a drink yet. I comment, “Merrill, the ale here might not be the best, but you've drank it before.”

“It's not that,” she says, pushing the glass away from her. “I'm just frustrated. I've been working on something for a while, and I'm not getting anywhere.”

“Anything I can help with?” I offer.

“No, I think I need something from my clan, but they won't listen to me now,” she says, sounding melancholy, but then lifts her head up. “But they might listen if Hawke talks to them. I'll have to ask her,” she comments, eyes lighting up again.

“I'm not sure what just happened, but I'm glad you're feeling more hopeful,” I say, laughing.

“You up for Wicked Grace tonight, Norah?” Isabela asks. “Your, uh, strategy is improving.”

“Shit, you caught that last time too?” I ask. “You're too good. But no, to answer your question, I can't. I have other things I have to do tonight.”

“Cookie, come see me tomorrow if you can. There's something I need to talk to you about, and soon,” says Varric. I nod, say my good-byes and head home.

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I take it slow on the way home, deep in thought. After the excitement of the morning, working my shift had seemed so dull compared to before. For some reason, the secrets of the who's who of Lowtown don't interest me as much as they once did. *Maybe it's time to hang up the role of Norah the Barmaid.* Anders is right, I could have hurt Hawke a few times now, and I'd chosen not to in order to spare her friends. I think about what my mother endured, and I still feel outraged. *But, it if means hurting people I care about, is it still worth it? And if I do it, how will I feel after?*

My mother hadn't wanted to give me up, had risked everything to see I had a life outside the Circle, and ultimately died because of it. At the time I learned of her sacrifice for me, I felt like I had been
given a gift, only to have it taken away again. Maybe part of why it hurt so much was because she was the only person in my life who had ever really loved me. Cat was with me, of course, but I'd learned that people will always betray you. But what if that's not true either? What if I can have a future where I don't have to be alone?

I feel something on my face, and when I reach up to wipe it off, I'm confused to find tears. When had I started crying?

I need to think this over. Maybe it would help me if I knew more about Malcolm Hawke. I need to know why he would leave my mother in the Gallows, and maybe learning more about him will help me understand. I only know of three people who could tell me about him, and I doubt Hawke will start offering up information. But her sister might, and I already know Orsino was friends with him. I need to go back to the Gallows.

Happily there are no men in front of my door when I get back to my place, and the guards have long since removed the bodies from this morning. I guess there are benefits to having the law on your side. I let myself in. The second I close the door, Cat is there, and puts her arm around me. I pat her head. “It's alright, Cat,” I say, smiling even though the tears. “Sometimes it hurts to change.”

I'd told a rare lie tonight. Most of the time I don't need to actually say anything that's untrue, but tonight I'd deliberately lied. I don't have any other plans tonight. I haven't checked my messages yet, but so far, I have no errands for the Friends, no secret meetings to spy on, or letters to compose. I think I just want to be by myself for a while.

I look over my messages, and, as luck would have it, I have an invitation for tea with First Enchanter Orsino. I know this is undoubtedly code for my first lesson with Bethany, but I'm hopeful I will actually have a chance to sit down with Orsino too.

At any rate, it gives me an excuse to escape the bar for another day. I make a mental note to myself to send word in the morning to Corff, tell him I'm not feeling well. I remember I'm supposed to meet Varric. Guess the dwarf’s “talk” will have to wait. This is more important.

I decide to turn in early. I stand up, and head to lock the door for the night when there's a knock.
Trust

Chapter Summary

Norah makes a choice to trust someone with everything...

Chapter Notes

I've already started this, but just a disclaimer: I'm totally breaking canon with my timeline. I'm skipping the three year blank after Hawke comes back from the Deep Roads. It would have ended up being "filler", which I didn't want, and messes with Norah's sequence of events. In order to keep the action moving and not bore anyone, that three years doesn't exist in Norah's timeline.

Chapter 22: Trust

I'm startled by a knock on the door. *Who would be knocking at my door at this time in the evening?* I grab my daggers before answering. I crack the door open and see Anders standing there. I expel a breath I didn't know I was holding, and open it the rest of the way.

“I wasn't expecting you,” I say apologetically, and immediately set down the daggers. “I'm a little jumpy after those men were here this morning.”

“Can I come in?” he asks.

“Of course,” I say, and allow him to enter, shutting the door behind us.

He looks at my face. “You've been crying,” he says, concerned. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“About us? No, nothing like that,” I reassure him. “You're the only thing lately that I am sure about.”

“Good,” he says and kisses me.

“Not that I'm not happy to see you, but why are you here?” I ask, trying not to sound harsh.

“There were templars sniffing around my clinic again,” he says. “I can't go back there right now, so I wandered around for a bit, and my feet took me to the Hanged Man. I think I just wanted to see you. Isabela told me you'd left early to go do something. I was hoping I could catch you before you left again.”

“Actually, there's no need for me to go anywhere, I'm free now,” I say. “But templars at your clinic? I was under the impression that they knew about it and left you alone.”

“With Knight Commander Meredith it charge, it was only a matter of time,” he says, a rough edge to his voice. “I'll need to find somewhere else to go eventually. The clinic won't be safe much longer.”
“I don't have a lot of space, but you're welcome here whenever you need,” I offer.

“I didn't mean to imply that,” he clarifies. “I know you have your 'person to protect'. In fact, I wasn't expecting to find you alone. Is she not here?”

“She's around,” I answer vaguely. I remember my earlier thoughts about not wanting to be alone forever. Can I trust him with Cat? What if it goes badly? I'm not sure if her ability to make people forget would will work on him because of his connection with Justice.

“You don't have to tell me about her if you don't want to. I just hope you know that your friend, whoever she is, is safe with me,” he says.

“It's probably easier if I just show you,” I say, resigning myself to this. I want him to know everything. Maybe he'll be able to accept it all, and I won't have to be alone. You can do this, Norah. Breathe. I walk to the other side of the room, and remove a board from the paneling. I put my hand on my staff where I keep it hidden. It feels strange in my hand, unfamiliar, even though I used it frequently in my training in Orlais. I brace myself for his reaction, but don't turn around.

“My two most dangerous secrets, Anders. Some of the same ones my mother had, and she was betrayed by those who claimed to care about her. I hope you know I'm trusting you a lot by telling you this,” I say, heart in my throat. Pulling the staff out of its hiding place, I turn and try to gauge his expression. So far, he's confused.

I allow the magic to rise up within me and I cast a glowing glyph of warding beneath me. The light of the creation spell fills the room, washing over the both of us. I allow it to fade quickly, but retain my grip on my staff. I hold it in front of me with both hands, almost in a protective posture.

Anders beams at me. “You're an apostate!” he exclaims, laughing. “Of all the things, that was the last thing I expected. I don't know how I didn't feel your power before. Why would you think I wouldn't understand this?” He comes toward me, but seeing my defensive stance, he stops, his face falling. “There's more, isn't there?”

“Let me finish,” I say, my grip on my staff tightening. “My mother was a Circle mage here in Kirkwall. She was quite talented from what I've heard, but I don't have any fancy Circle training like she did,” I say, my voice shaking with emotion. “A few simple spells are all I've ever been able to manage, but it was enough to put me in danger.”

“A danger I know all too well,” he says.

“Sorry, but no, you don't. You may have endured abuses in the Circle, but I didn't have even such protection as that. Do you remember when I talked about my aunt in Orlais?”

He nods, and I continue. “Lady Colette couldn't risk losing me to the Circle, so she found someone for me to apprentice under in private. A mage from Tevinter.” I shudder, thinking about Nikolaus.

“Tevinter? I don't like where this is going.”

“I know not all Tevinter mages practice blood magic, but this one did,” I say, nodding at his apprehension. “And my aunt wanted me to learn it. She thought I could use it to control people and gain her greater influence in Val Royeaux. When I wouldn't do what she wanted, she let him...torture me. The things he did...” I say, trailing off into my memory for a moment. “It took all I had to refuse. She finally resorted to threatening my only friend. That's when we escaped.”

“Norah-,” he starts again, but again I interrupt him.
“I’m still not finished,” I say loudly, tears now streaming down my face. “Sorry, this is just hard for me. I’ve never told anyone this before, but I’m trying to trust you, Anders. I want you to know it all.”

Breathe. Inhale. “Cat, I have someone I want you to meet.” I say into the room. She materializes behind me.

“Are you sure about this, Norah?” she asks.

“Remember why I was crying when you first found me in the Fade?” I ask her. Because no one ever wants to stay with me, I think. “I have to try.”

“You’re right,” she says, smiling, “it does hurt to change.”

“A spirit? Your friend is a spirit, and outside of the Fade?” he asks, seeming a bit dazed.

“Yes. Cat’s been with me since I first learned I had magic. She’s a spirit of curiosity, and until lately, the only being I ever thought I could trust. Nikolaus, my instructor,” I spit the word out, “found out about her. I overheard him telling my aunt that he knew a way to bind her. They were going to risk turning her into demon just to control me. I couldn't let anyone do that. I won't ever let anyone hurt Cat, not even if it kills me.”

“Even if it kills you,” he repeats.

His face is sullen, and I can tell he’s struggling with something. It feels like an eternity before he speaks. “I understand. I regret that Justice and I did not make better choices,” he says, his voice sounding small. “Your concern about Justice makes more sense to me now. You already know that he’s changing, becoming Vengeance more and more, and that I won't be able to hold him back eventually. I told you he’s not a demon, but the truth is I’m not sure I know anymore. I've become a monster, and someday I'll end up hurting you.”

“Anders, If I believed that, I never would have trusted you with this.”

“It doesn’t negate the fact that my situation is different than yours, and one day, like it or not, I will likely be a threat to you or your friend,” he says. “I won't betray your confidence, Norah, but this changes things, and I need to think on this. For now, I think it would be best if we don't see each other.”

And he walks out on me.

* * *

The next day, appropriately enough, brought rain. I’d cried last night for myself, and what could have been. I'd given Anders a choice, and he'd taken it. Cat tried to console me, but later said my emotions were too much and she'd return later. My tears dried after a time. I'd done everything I could, and it still didn't work. Maybe I am meant to be alone.

My message for Corff isn't a lie anymore, I really don't feel up to dealing with work. But I won't stand up Orsino and Bethany. As I'm not working, I'm free to wear whatever I want again. Since I know I'll be training today, I go with my leathers. I'm going to be hiding under my rain cloak anyway, so I suppose it doesn't matter if anyone sees me. I think about the others, and I hope Isabela's tip pays off. I would really welcome a good fight right about now.

I walk through Lowtown with my hood up, keeping my face down. I'd rather not encounter anyone who knows me, at least until I get where I'm going. Thankfully I reach the docks quickly.
The Qunari compound is always an intimidating sight. I've never given much thought to them being here, but surely this is a long time for them. *Don't Qunari usually only stay if they're attempting to raid or convert people to the Qun? Why are they still here?*

I have an amusing thought of gentle Qunari educators standing by information boards like the Chantry sisters, reciting the Qun. Then again, I guess the Exalted Marches hadn't exactly been peaceful either, with the Chant of Light being spread by force.

It's a long soggy trip to the Gallows. The sea is choppy, and the ferry over takes longer than usual. My hooded cloak is helpful in keeping out the rain, and I'm grateful that it also keeps anyone from trying to talk to me. *I can do this. Cat is here, we're going to be alright.* I'm sure Cat is excited to see the training today, but she's tempering her enthusiasm to spare my feelings.

I walk down the gangplank off the ship, and I do feel a tingle of excitement. *I'm going to learn that wonderful Haste spell, and I get to see Bethany.* Well, to be fair, I'll probably fail at the spell multiple times and not get it right today, but I'm going to at least *start* learning the spell.

As I'm crossing the courtyard, I see the recruits again, this time with someone I assume is their Knight-Captain. He's young to be a Knight-Captain, but he has a sour expression that makes him look older. *I wonder if he ever smiles?* I give a chuckle at myself, despite my sadness. *A couple of days of this honesty stuff and now I'm wanting to make a stranger smile? What will be next, saving widows and orphans?*

I round the bend toward the stairs with the portcullis, and I hear someone speaking. The words “Ser Thrask” are audible. *Thrask was Isabela's templar contact from before. This might be worth listening to. Guess the widows and orphans will have to wait.*

I pick a spot that is out of the way and partially hidden in shadows. I look around, but no one seems to be paying attention to me. Just in case, I bend down, pretending to be tying my boot laces to buy me a few minutes to eavesdrop.

“Telling you, I just have a weird feeling about it,” says a male voice in what I now recognize as a Starkhaven accent, thanks to Sebastian. “They've been out there too long - it was only supposed to take two days, and it's been twice that now.” Glancing over, I see a group of mages clustered together. The speaker is a young male with dark skin.

“And what the blazes are we supposed to do about it from in here?” asks a female voice in an angry tone. This one has a tattoo on her pale face, and her expression is angry. “Because our last attempt at leaving ended so well,” she adds sarcastically.

*Those must be the mages that got Thrask in hot water with his superiors.* I wonder for a second who they are talking about that has been out too long, but I'm going to be late if I don't get moving. I head through the portcullis without being stopped this time. *Maybe the templars recognize me now? That's a scary thought.* Finding Orsino's office is easier this time, and I knock politely.
Norah learns about more than magic on her trip to the Gallows.

Chapter 23: Answers and Questions

Orsino opens the door, and a smile splits his face as soon as he sees me. “Norah!” he calls, gesturing me into his office. “So good to see you.”

The moment I'm inside, his expression changes. Okay, so much for small talk. I guess we're straight to business. “I've arranged for you and Bethany to practice in one of the basement areas. It's large enough for what you need, but private. No one will be near it today. Oh, and I haven't told her who this 'new student' is yet. I thought you might want to surprise her.”

“Thank you for doing this, Orsino,” I say.

“Don't thank me just yet. Bethany's a grueling instructor, and we haven't discussed the method of payment,” he says.

“Then you have something for me?” I ask. I could use a distraction.

“Yes,” he states. “Come see me after your lesson and I'll go over the details.”

Orsino directs me down a back staircase toward the basements. The lower chambers have even more twists and turns than those above ground, but I find the place with no trouble.

Bethany is already waiting, and a look of surprise crosses her face when she sees me. “Norah!” she runs to me and embraces me. “I should have known Orsino was pulling something over on me. He told me he wanted me to teach an apostate in private.” She laughs. I don't.

“It's not a joke, Bethany,” I say.

“I don't understand. Where's this mage then?” she asks, then realization dawns on her. “No, you? Maker's Breath, Norah. Why didn't you say something before?”

“I had good reasons back then. Reasons that are less important now,” I say. “I'd still appreciate it if you didn't include this detail in any of your letters home. Not many people know about me.”

“I guess I can understand that. I made the choice I did for a reason, too. Tell me about your talents then. I'll need to know what you've already learned to get an idea of your skill level.”

I fill her in on the general details: that I was raised by a family member, and taught by a mage tutor. I grab a basic staff from those leaning against the wall, and I show her the few spells I do know. It's mostly spirit magic, but also a few glyphs and a healing spell. She listens and watches me patiently as I show her.
“Not bad,” she says at the end. “I've seen worse from the newer apprentices, but your form needs a lot of practice.”

“So you can teach me?” I ask, hopeful.

“We're friends. I would teach you even if you were awful at it, which you're not. No, I think we can work well together,” she says.

“I want to learn the Haste spell. I remember what it felt like, and I need to know it,” I say. I had nearly paused mid sentence, thinking about Anders casting the spell, and had to force the rest of the thought away. *You can't think about him now, Norah. Focus.*

“Hmm,” she says, considering. “That's a pretty advanced spell. I think it would be better if we mastered a couple of basics first. Remember the ice spells I was casting that night in the alley? The simplest form is called Winter's Grasp. If you can get that one down, you'll be able to shatter your own enemies without backup. It's also useful for slowing down pursuers. I think it would be helpful for someone who fights like you do.”

“Alright, Maestro. I'll follow your lead,” I say, shrugging.

“What did you call me just now?” she asks, raising a brow.

“Maestro. You know, the guy who conducts a group of musicians? Like at the symphony?” I say.

“You must have led a very different life than I did,” she says, laughing. “We didn't have time for symphonies while moving around the Ferelden countryside. But I like it. It's a better title than Enchanter, anyway.”

*Here's my chance.* “I heard you learned your magic from your father. What was it like growing up with an apostate?” I ask.

“He was a good man, and the best father we could have asked for. Would you believe Father actually once lived in this very tower? It's strange to think that my life would also lead me here.”

“I've been wondering - how did he manage to get out of the Circle?” I ask.

“He wouldn't talk too much about it, but my sister found out recently that he had done some kind of job for the Grey Wardens,” she explains. “They...threatened Mother while she was pregnant with my sister. Something about needing Father's blood. He did it to save her. I was furious when I found out, but, in the end, it was the only way he was able to be free of the Circle and marry mother. Carver and I would never have even existed if it hadn’t been for them.”

*It was the only way he could save Leandra and their child. Would I have made the same choice? To save the most important person to me, by leaving someone else behind? I felt conflicted, so I told her I was ready to begin our lesson, shrugging it off. I'll think about it later.*

We spend an hour or two practicing, and I think I have the basics of the Winter's Grasp spell down, but I'm still a long way from being able to use it in combat. We promise to continue at our next lesson, and hug good-bye. I really do enjoy her company. *Funny, I never thought I'd say that about someone in the Hawke family.*

I return to the First Enchanter to hear about his “payment” plan. He wastes no time in getting into it. “The templars requested a group of our mages go with them up into the mountains,” he says. “They had reason to suspect that a cave there was being used as a waypoint for the mage underground. It's not that long of a journey, but they should have been back a couple of days ago. The templars don't
want us sending more mages. I could send a team in secret, but I can't very well use any of my own people, not knowing there may still be templars up there waiting for them. I want you to find the missing mages and report back on what's happened to them.”

“I notice you didn't mention bringing them back alive,” I point out.

“If they haven't made it back by now, something went wrong with the mission. That means the mages are likely either dead or gone. Of course, this is one time I wouldn't mind being wrong. In which case, yes, of course, getting them back home again would be preferable.”

“I'll look into it,” I say, although I honestly have no idea how. Anders would have been the perfect person to ask, but after last night, he's not an option right now. Although I know of their entrance into the Gallows, I really don't have any connections to the mage underground, and I'm not sure if any of Hawke's other friends will care enough to help me. *I might be on my own on this one.*

“You seem melancholy, dear; has something happened?” he asked.

“I'm fine, I've just had a lot to think about lately,” I admit, while keeping it vague. “I'll let you know what I'm able to learn,” I tell him.

“I hope you can stay longer next time,” he says, smiling. “Being around you reminds me of a better time. Farewell, Norah, Miss Cat.”

“Until then,” I say, bowing my head a little in acknowledgment. Cat bows as well, still delighted that someone can see her.

The rain hasn't eased up as I leave, and I know I'm in for another rough ferry ride home. Seeing Bethany made the trip worth it, but my heart is still heavy. I'd never really thought about the other Amells before, or their position on Leandra marrying an apostate. I don't want to have any understanding of Malcolm's position. I want to continue to hate him and his family. If I'm honest with myself, I think it's mostly because if I don't have my revenge, then I don't know what my purpose is anymore.

For now, I need to focus on the task in front of me. It sounds like I at least have a job to find out about the mages in the mountains. I'll figure out the rest after. The sound of the rain and concealment from my hood keep anyone from noticing as I talk quietly with a nearly-invisible Cat. She liked watching the practice today, as I had expected.

The rain stops as I get to the docks, but the roads are damp and littered with puddles. *Good thing I didn't wear my long skirts today,* I think. I know Isabela will likely be back at the Hanged Man, but I can't go in there today after reporting in sick. I'm already on Corff's bad side. As much as I'd like to hear about how her meeting in Lowtown went, it'll just have to wait until tomorrow.

I lower my hood and decide to take a walk through town. I don't have any Red Jenny business that I know of today, but if I go home, I'll just be stuck with my own thoughts again. The sea air near the docks is fresh after the rain, and despite the dampness, the temperature is perfect for a stroll.

I randomly take turn after turn, not closely paying attention to where I'm going, just enjoying the walk. I find myself at the stairs heading down to the Alienage. I don't spend much time down there, just stopping by to see Merrill from time to time. I remember my promise to get her out of the city. *Maybe she'll be willing to go with me to help a group of mages. The worst thing that can happen is she says no, right?* Having decided, I start down the stairs and head for her home.
Chapter 24: Friendly Surprises

It takes a moment before there is an answer at Merrill's door. I'm just starting to think she might not be home when the door creaks open.

“Oh, it's you,” Merrill says, sounding disappointed. She then attempts to correct herself, “That's not what I mean, I just thought you might be Hawke. No, that's not better. I'm happy to see you, Norah, I am.”

I laugh. Merrill's awkwardness can be adorable sometimes. “Why yes, Merrill, I'd love to come in,” I jest.

“Oh, of course, please,” she amends, opening the door for me to enter. “Sorry about that. I had sent word to Hawke some time ago asking her to come see me. I need her help talking to my old Keeper, but I haven't heard from her.”

“I suppose Hawke must be pretty busy now that she's moved to Hightown,” I say. Merrill gives a sigh and moves toward the main section of her house. We sit near the fireplace.

“I don't mean to be inhospitable. Can I get you some water?” she asks.

“Thank you, but no. I actually came here because I was hoping you'd help me with something,” I say.

“Oh?” she asks simply.

“I've been asked by someone to look into a group of missing mages and templars near a cave in the mountains,” I say. “You know that area pretty well, having lived near Sundermount, and I did promise to get you out of the city. I figured you might want to go with me.”

“Varric has been on me to get out more. I suppose I do need a break. Who else is going?” she asks.

“Well, that's the problem,” I start. “I'm kind of playing hooky from the bar today. I can't go in there to see who's around.”

She nods. “Varric will know where the others are. I could ask him for you.”

I give her a grateful smile. “Would you? That would be such a help.”

* * *

I expected Varric would get Isabela to join us, but I’m surprised when Merrill walks up and I see it's
Fenris with them instead. *Maybe Isabela's meeting is taking a little longer than she thought.* Fenris doesn't look me in the eye, but I'm glad to have any company today. I hadn't really looked forward to attempting this on my own.

Varric grins when he sees me. “When I said I wanted to talk, Cookie, I expected it would be over a pint.”

I chuckle. “Then I'll buy you two when we get back. You're really helping me today,” I say.

“Well, what are we waiting for, then? Tell us what we're doing,” he says.

“I have it on good authority that a group of mages and templars from the Circle went missing in the mountains. They were supposed to be back at the Gallows two days ago. I have the location that they were headed to, and my instructions are to find out what happened.”

“This from one of your Friends?” Varric asks, carefully placing just enough emphasis on the last word that I understand his meaning, but the others might not catch on. I had assumed the others at least knew of my connections by now.

*Maybe Varric can keep secrets.*

“Maybe,” I reply, just as evasively. “Actually, I have it from two sources, so I'm pretty sure the information is correct.”

“What kind of trouble are we expecting?” asks Fenris, speaking up for the first time.

“The cave is suspected of housing runaway mages. So, possibly hostile mages, blood magic or even demons,” I state, knowing Fenris will have no qualms going up against rogue mages.

“The mountains have many perils,” adds Merrill. “They could have just as easily encountered wildlife or other dangers.”

“No Orlesians on this one? I'm disappointed,” jokes Varric. The other two give him a confused look. “Guess you had to be there,” he says, shrugging.

“Let's see this done, then,” says Fenris.

* * *

Although the rain has moved on now, it's made the mountain passes slippery and our journey is slowed as a result. I've always been light on my feet, and Merrill is used to mountainous terrain, so we don't struggle with the mud as much as Fenris or Varric. Merrill and I scout ahead a bit, but so far, we aren't running into any trouble. I slow my pace, allowing Merrill to go further on.

I'm about to turn around when I hear voices behind me. It's Varric, and I hear him tell Fenris, “I'm telling you, something is going on between her and Blondie.”

I step back out where they can see me. “You need to work on your spy network, Varric. They're getting slow; that piece of information is old news.” Fenris looks away, seemingly embarrassed to have been caught talking about me.

Varric, on the other hand, isn't remotely embarrassed. “So, something *did* happen.”

“It's over and done with already, so let's drop it,” I say.

“I wanted to talk to you in private about it, but we didn't get the chance,” he says. “For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I like the guy, but Blondie-” he continues.
“Can we not talk about my personal life right now?” I ask, cutting him off. I immediately regret my harsh tone. “Sorry, that came out wrong. This friendship thing is new to me, and I'm not used to anyone knowing my business. Let's just say I'm not ready to talk about it yet. I'd like to focus on finding the templars and mages if we can.”

Thankfully, Merrill also returns at this point. “Did I miss something?” she asks, looking between the three of us.

I shake my head. “We were just saying we were ready to move on.”

“Good,” she says, “because we've got a problem ahead. A group of those Qunari who aren't Qunari anymore, oh, what's the word?”


“At least ten,” says Merrill. Varric swears under his breath.

“Were the mages with them?” I ask.

“No, just the Tal-Vashoth. They're camped just ahead, but it's the only path up the mountain,” she says.

“Then we have no choice but to go through them. Any ideas?” I ask.

“Plenty,” says Varric, and launches into a plan. “Broody here will charge ahead, try to hold them at a choke point. Daisy, you use that tangle earth thing to help control the flow of them. Cookie, you back them up and use flanking maneuvers to backstab when you can. Bianca and I will hold back, offering cover fire and pick off any that slip through.”

I give him a wide grin. “That's brilliant, Varric! I don't really have any experience fighting Tal-Vashoth, but that sounds perfect.”

“Watch out for the spearmen,” Fenris advises. “They can hit you from a long distance. It's best to stay out of their reach if you can; the Qunari people hit hard in general, but they're slow. And let's hope they don't have one of their mages with them. Stay on your toes.”

“Wow, that's amazing, I can't imagine what this would have been like if I had come alone,” I admit. “I'm glad you guys are here.” I forge ahead, and I don't see the looks that pass between the others.

Using Merrill's intel, and Fenris's knowledge of Tal-Vashoth tactics, we manage to implement Varric's plan. Fenris rushes in, catching a Tal-Vashoth guard at an opening between two large boulders. Perfect. I run ahead, treading lightly around Merrill's root spell. I really want to figure that one out too, but I doubt the Dalish will want to pass that kind of knowledge on to an outsider.

I end up behind a trapped spearman, and make quick work of him with my daggers, slashing his calves first to bring him lower, and finally slicing through his neck. The pull on my daggers from the muscle is substantial. These Tal-Vashoth are really built for battle.

I spin just in time to dodge a spear, which lodges in the back of the body I'd just dropped. I narrow my eyes and sprint forward, low to the ground, ready to dive again if another spear is thrown my direction. I needn't bother, as Fenris is already engaging the spearman who had attacked me. I run up behind him and stab my dagger in the softer flesh of his lower side, near his kidneys. He turns to take a swing at me, but Fenris's glowing fingers show through his torso. I grin at him over the body as his target falls, before running to aid Merrill.
She's twirling her staff back and forth, one end then the other, slinging spells as she backs up. Her opponent already has one of Bianca's crossbow bolts protruding from one shoulder. The Tal-Vashoth is carrying a great axe, but Merrill is carefully keeping enough distance that he hasn't gotten in range yet. He looks a little worse for wear from the bolt and her spells.

I step up to be his target, and signal for Merrill to hit him when she can. I take my wide stance, ready to dodge out of the way. I assess him. He's definitely big and slow, like Fenris said, but if that axe hits me, I'm probably done for. I see Merrill casting out of the corner of my eye, and am impressed by lightning streaking across the sky. It alternately strikes here and there, but one of the bolts definitely strikes the axeman in front of me, and I see my chance. I dash behind him, and without turning, give an upward thrust with both daggers at the same time. The Tal-Vashoth stumbles from the hit, giving me enough reach to finish him.

We've taken down several between the four of us, but these guys are so strong it's taken a lot of time. They remaining Tal-Vashoth have used that time to regroup and they come at us at once. I see Fenris take a hit from an axeman while he is distracted fighting another. His attacker raises the axe above his head to go again. My turn. I slide in the sand next to the giant Tal-Vashoth, severing the artery under his raised arm. His weapon falls uselessly to the ground, and his shoulder dips close enough for me to turn, climb up his bent leg, and cut deeply into his neck. He collapses, and makes gurgling sounds for a few minutes before he's gone.

I don't wait around for this, of course, as it's on to the next, and the next. At last, they all lay dead or dying, no longer a threat. I'm covered in blood up to my elbows, and the rest of me is splattered with it, but I couldn't care less. I let out a whoop of excitement.

“Andraste's tits, Norah. Remind me not to piss you off,” Varric says, smiling. “You get bloodthirsty when you're angry.”

I shrug, and say, “At least I've gotten it out of my system. Maker, I feel better.” I stretch, and it's then that I notice Fenris is holding his shoulder. That's where he'd been hit by the Tal-Vashoth axeman. I walk the short distance to him, stepping over the few corpses in the way.

“Fenris, can I take a look?” I ask.

“I've had worse,” he says, but he turns and sits on a nearby rock, back to me, and allows me to look at it. He's bleeding. It seems like a lot. I can see the cut has torn through his armor and into the meat of his shoulder.

“Merrill, can you heal him?” I ask, wondering why she hasn't done so yet.

“Sorry, I never studied any healing spells,” she apologizes from across the way.

I have a sudden thought. “Oh, I have a recipe for a health potion. All I really need for it is elfroot. We'll have to be on the lookout. It doesn't help now, of course. I'll just bind it the best I can.”

“Elfroot grows all over these mountains, I'm sure we'll find some,” Merrill says.

I tend to his shoulder using a strip of fabric from my pack. Why hadn't I thought to bring health potions? I could try healing him, could borrow Merrill's staff and close his wound right now, but it would mean revealing what I am.

Satisfied that I have the wound and clean and securely bound as I can, I back away. “Thank you,” he says, and turns to look at me, catching my expression. “You were happy a minute ago; why do you now look sad?”
“I feel bad that you got hurt doing something for me,” I explain.

“It will heal,” he says. “It’s not my dominant arm, and I can still move it. I should still be able to swing my sword well enough for now.”

After a few more moments to rest, we search the bodies of the fallen Tal-Vashoth. They don’t have much, but we recover a few coins and a health potion. When I find the latter, I’m able to breathe again. I show it to Fenris.

“We don’t have to wait after all,” I say, and hand it to him. He breathes a sigh of relief after drinking it. He’s not completely healed, but he should be able to move now without too much pain. I feel less guilty. *What if that hadn’t been there?* I reject that thought for now. It’s getting late in the day, and we need to get moving.

We set back out toward the cave near the top of the mountain.
Chapter Summary

Norah and friends reach the mountain cave.

Chapter 25: Highs and Lows

As we climb further up the mountain, the views are spectacular. *Maybe I just like heights. Val Royeaux is beautiful, but not like this.* The roads are thankfully drying out, or this part of the trek would have been nearly impossible. We're able to walk at the same pace now, although the path is too narrow at times for more than one at a time.

There's no sign of the mages or templars, but with the recent rains, any evidence that had existed is gone now. I take a deep breath, smelling nothing but fresh air and evergreen trees. I remind myself to keep an eye out. We don't know what happened to the party that came up here, or if there really is a connection to the mage underground. Of course, I can't say it openly, but I've decided I don't blame mages for wanting to be free of the Circle. What had happened to both my mother and I is proof enough that being forced into a cage doesn't help.

The path widens and we come to a good-sized landing near the top of the mountain. Another trail continues upward, but this is the cave that's indicated in the directions Orsino gave me.

“I think this the right place,” I say, examining the area around the entrance for traps.

“I hope this turns out better than the pirate den,” Fenris comments dryly.

“Any cave we come back out of is a good one,” I respond.

“I'll drink to that,” Varric comments. “After the Deep Roads, I've had enough of being underground for a while. Let's make this quick.”

I take lead, carefully scanning the walls and floors for traps. I don't neglect the ceilings either this time, the memories of my last experiences reminding me again of Sophie's lessons. There is some evidence that this cave was recently occupied: discarded supplies, footprints in the dirt. What I find curious are the cart and rails in the middle of the tunnel.

“This must have been a mine,” I say.

“Which means it could be unstable,” Varric adds.

“Great,” I say, shaking my head. “Add that to the list of things to worry about.”

We continue in, following the rail tracks, but I'm moving slower than usual, listening. The only sounds are our own footsteps and breathing.

“I don't like this place,” says Merrill, and I have to agree. So far, it looks empty, but I keep expecting something to jump out at me.
The next bend opens into a large chamber, almost square-shaped. The tracks continue on through to the other side through another tunnel on the far wall. I pause at the entrance to this cavern, taking it in. There doesn't appear to be anything in this room. Perhaps it was used for some purpose that was abandoned long ago? Varric appears in the doorway next to me. “What is it, Cookie?” he asks.

“Something about this chamber feels off to me,” I answer. “Do you see anything?”

He spends a moment looking, “No, I don't.”

I cautiously step out into the room, squinting my eyes, expecting something at any moment. Nothing happens. I take another step. Nothing. Fenris steps up next to Varric. “Why are we stopping?”

“Cookie here has a bad feeling,” he explains. “Maybe you'd better go with her, in case we run into problems of the 'needs stabbing' variety.”

Fenris has already stepped out into the room, but I put a hand out to stop him from moving any further. “Varric, you and Merrill hang back; if there is a trap, it might be set off by weight,” I say. “Fenris, watch me carefully - wait for me to take the next step to make sure it's safe, then step where I step.”

“Very well,” Fenris agrees, and we move our way carefully across the room. Still nothing happens. Maybe I was wrong about this chamber. I shrug, and we enter the tunnel on the far side. That's when the trap springs, iron grates slamming down to cover the entryway we'd just come through. Looking across, I can see Merrill and Varric stuck on the other side of a similar set of bars. “Shit, I should have known it would be the other side,” I say, admonishing myself. “We're going to have to find a way around.”

“I think that's the least of our troubles,” Fenris says, looking ahead down the tunnel. I peer into the dim tunnel to see what he's referring to, when my eyes go wide. A woman in mage robes stands at the end of the hallway. She has her hand on something on the wall. She waves goodbye, and the floor disappears beneath us.

We fall. It doesn't take long, though it feels like miles. I land ungracefully on something that gives only a little under my weight. A cloud of dust and mold rises up from the impact, and I sneeze several times. I hear something snap above us, but I can't make it out.

It's dim here, but not completely dark. There is feeble light coming in from my left, enough to see - after the dust settles - that we've landed in an iron cage. The snap was the roof of the trap closing. My shoulders slump. This just keeps getting worse. My heart begins to race at the thought of being confined down here. Not now, Norah. Breathe. You can find a way out of this.

A low pile of moldy hay seems have been what broke my fall. After a few seconds, my eyes adjust better to the dim light. I can hear Fenris breathing, and I can just make out his outline in the dark. He's not moving.

“Fenris?” I say, immediately concerned. He doesn't answer.

I move over to him. He's sprawled awkwardly on the floor. No hay to help him when he landed. He'd hit the stone floor hard. I reach down and gently shake his shoulder. Nothing.

“Fenris!?” I call out again, my voice more shrill. Still no answer, he must be unconscious. There is something dark in his white hair. Blood. Maker, no.

“Cat!” I say into the darkness. I wait a moment, but she doesn't appear. I realize I hadn't checked recently for the shimmer to see if Cat was still with us. The last time I had talked with her was on the
ferry home the Gallows. *How had I forgotten my friend? Where is Cat?* Maybe she's still in the tunnels, with the others. *Breathe, inhale.*

Fenris's breathing becomes raspy. *I don't have a choice, I'm going to have to try this, staff or no.* I kneel next to him. Desperation fueling me, I tap into the well of magic inside me. *Exhale. You can do this.*

I hold my hand over Fenris, close to his chest, and allow the magic to flow from inside me. *Please, please let this work.* The glow from my hand illuminates the room, but my attention is only on Fenris. Thankfully, his wounds start to knit together. *Yes. More, keep going.* It's moving agonizingly slowly, but it's working. I'm rewarded with a better sounding breath from him. *Not enough yet.* Sustaining the spell is starting to wear on me, but I can't stop yet. Finally, Fenris gives a gasp and opens his eyes. The glow fades from my hand and we sink back into darkness.

"Norah?" he asks, sounding confused. His voice is hoarse.

"Not yet, I need a moment," I say weakly. Healing him like that, with me out of practice and no staff, had taken all of my reserves.

He sits up, waving off my hands when I attempt to stop him. Still, he obliges my request, giving me a few minutes before speaking again. "So you're a mage. That's the secret you have been hiding," he says, scoffing.

"One of them, but watch it - I'm pretty sure I just saved your life," I say defensively.

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful. Perhaps now is not the time for this conversation. Where are we?"

"We fell straight down a shaft from the tunnel above," I say in explanation. "We seem to be in some sort of cage. I landed on that hay over there, but you weren't so lucky."

I stand, determined to explore our surroundings better, but my head hits the bars above me with a loud clang. "Ow, okay, so it's a short cage. That was dumb," I hear a faint chuckle come from Fenris. I make my way around the perimeter. It's small, maybe fifteen feet long at best, and the top of it isn't tall enough for either of us to stand. My heart starts racing again, and my hands begin to shake. *No, Norah, you can't afford to do that. See if there's an exit first.* I find a door. It's locked. *Shit.*

"There's a door over here, but it's locked," I say, already anticipating what he's going to say next.

"So pick it; you are trained in that, right?" he says dismissively.

"That's the thing; I'm terrible at it. I tried, I mean, I practiced a lot, but I never quite got the hang of it," I say, beginning to ramble nervously. Sighing, I get my lockpicks out of my pack. They haven't been used in such a long time, they look practically new. I kneel in front of the door, and my hands start shaking again. I try to still them, but I barely get one of the picks in the lock before it falls on the stone floor with a metallic ping. I feel around on the floor and find it.

"Norah stop," he says. *I can't. I have to try again. Have to get out of here. Have to find Cat. I'm not sure which thought is strongest.*

"Norah, I said stop. Come here," he says, this time more insistently.

I stand back up, carefully bending over to avoid hitting my head again, and I make my way to him. He reaches out a hand and touches my arm. "I knew it, you're trembling. Sit," he insists, leaving no option but to comply. I sit next to him, and inhale a quick breath of surprise when he puts his arm around me and pulls me to his side. I end up angled a bit away from him, my head on his shoulder,
his arm resting atop my own. “Sorry,” he says. “Touching seemed to help with your trauma.”

“No, you’re right, it did help last time. Thank you,” I say, but my face feels warm.

“It’s not entirely unpleasant, either,” he says, his tone amused.

“Fenris—” I start, trying to move away from him, but he pulls me back, and changes the topic.

“You don’t always need to push yourself so hard,” he says, and I can feel his low voice vibrating his chest. “We are not alone down here; it will be alright. Either the others will find us, or our captors will come back. Either way, there is nothing to do but wait and rest up until then. Be patient.”

“I’ll try,” I say. “How are your wounds, are you alright? You seem to be at the mercy of all my worst skills today.”

“I am fine. I might be a bit sore later, but I can already tell my shoulder is better than it was,” he says. “It’s hard to think that you are a mage. Why do you not fight with a staff if you have magic?”

“Because I’m honestly not that good at it,” I admit. “I learned mostly defensive spells, so my daggers are usually a better choice. I’ve been training with them a lot longer, anyway.”

“How long?” he asks.

“My aunt Colette had me training to fight for as long as I can remember,” I say. “I guess the first remember holding a blade was at...four maybe?”

“Your aunt was your tormentor then?” he asks.

“One of them. My mage instructor was worse. He’s the one who...”

“The one who confined you, yes. Sorry, you probably don’t want to talk about that right now,” he says, looking up at the cage ceiling. I shrug against his shoulder.

“It’s getting easier the more I do. He was awful. After he’d hurt me, he’d make me heal myself to hide it.”

“At least you can remember,” he says, and I turn to look at him. “I have large blank spaces in my memory. I remember the feeling of getting these,” he indicates his tattoo markings, “but there is a lot that I don’t recall. Fenris isn’t even my real name, it’s just what Danarius called me.”

I think of Cat, and her ability to make people forget, and I wonder if they use something similar. I never thought what effect it might have on people. “It bothers you, not being able to remember?” I ask quietly.

“Yes. It leaves me with only my own mind to fill in the details, and I imagine the worst,” he says.

“You’re right, it would be scary to not know your own past. I’m sorry that happened to you, Fenris,” I say, pausing for a while before a thought hits me. “Oh, but I do have a new mentor now who is teaching me elemental spells.”

“Anders,” he says, and I can hear his distaste.

“No, not him. He didn’t know about me either until the end,” I say, suddenly sad.

He sighs. “I keep picking all the wrong subjects to talk about, don’t I?”
“At least you're distracting me from being trapped down here. No, it's Bethany, actually. She's the one teaching me,” I finish telling him.


“I have some new friends who get me an invitation from time to time,” I say, happiness about my new connections evident from my tone. “But, that's also how we ended up here in this cave. My contact in the Gallows told me about this place.”

“I suppose it's fitting. I don't have many people I would count as a friend; of course fate would have it that at least one of you would turn out to be a mage,” he says, and I feel him shaking his head.

“I expected you would be angrier,” I admit.

“Like you said, your magic was useful today. I'd be in far worse shape if you hadn't been here. But, it will take some getting used to.”

I feel the weariness of my tension from the enclosed space, holding the spell, and the fight before getting to me. I yawn.

“You can rest if you need to. If our captors haven't come yet, then this may take a while.” I try to get up, but he holds me firm, keeping me from moving. “Just rest; you are fine where you are.”

I feel him shift a little, his arm curling more to my side to support my weight. *I shouldn't let him hold me like this. But it is helping me not panic.*

“Anders was a fool to let you go,” Fenris says after a few moments, his breath stirring in my hair.

“There's something we can agree on,” I reply bitterly.

“He left you then? I had assumed you were the one who ended it,” he says.

“Once he found out about me, he said he and Justice were going to be a threat to me and he left,” I explain.

“I take it all back. Maybe he has made one smart decision.”

“Maybe I should get up. I think I'm feeling better now,” I say.

“Norah, I won't deny you’re attractive, but I don't value my friendships so little that I would throw one away because it is not more,” he says sincerely. “Just stay. Rest.”
Chapter 26: A Way Out

Somehow, I manage to sleep. I awaken a while later to find Fenris stroking my hand. “How long was I out?” I ask. The light in the cave is the same as before, with no way to tell the passage of time.

“I'm not sure, but it can’t have been more than a couple of hours,” he says. His fingers rest on my ring. “This is new. What is this?” he asks.

“That's the ring Isabela gave me as payment for the pirate thing,” I explain. “I thought it was magic, but it doesn't seem to do anything. It has a inscription inside, Valos Atredum.” As soon as I say the words aloud in Dwarven, the ring gives a faint glow and vibrates. A tingle of magic spreads outward from it, then fades.

“Looks as though it does something, after all,” Fenris comments, amused.

“You're shitting me - all I had to do was say it out loud? Ugh, dwarves.”

“Maybe you had to be underground for it to work,” he suggests. I consider the possibility. The man we had taken it from had been underground at the time.

“I don't know what the effect of this ring is, exactly, but my Carta contact told me the inscription translated to ‘Favor of the Ancestors’. Can’t hurt to try the lock again,” I say. “Anyway, I have an idea.”

“I hate when you say it like that. You need something from me, don’t you?” he asks.

“Would you mind doing that thing with your hand, you know, when you make it glow?” I ask.

“It doesn't work on locks, or I'd have done it already,” he says.

“I don't need you to open the lock; I just need the light,” I add awkwardly.

He chuckles. “I think I can manage that. Priceless lyrium tattoos, reduced to nothing more than a lantern. I wish I could see Danarius's face right now.”

“They're lyrium?” I ask, then focus, shaking my head. “Never mind, let's just try this. Watch your head - the top of the cage is pretty low.”

I kneel in front of the lock and Fenris provides enough light for me to see it better. The lock is old and rusted. It takes a few minutes, but I manage to get it open. I bet Isabela had no idea the ring could do this when she gave it to me. Swinging the door open, I step outside and stretch. “Thank you, dwarven ancestors!” I exclaim.

“Let's be gone from this place,” he says.

“Happily,” I say, smiling.

I take the lead again, fairly certain there won't be any traps on this level as we had already been in the traps, but I'm cautious, nevertheless. I peek around the corner where the light is coming from and see
no one ahead of us. I motion for Fenris to join me, and we move forward.

We reach what appears to be a main tunnel, with others similar in size to the one we just left branching off in different directions. *No wonder Varric and Merrill haven't been able to find us yet.* This place is a veritable labyrinth. At least it's easier to see by the torchlight.

“If there are more cages down those passageways, that might be where they're keeping the templars and mages. We should investigate,” Fenris says.

We take the first on the left and follow it until it dead ends. There are cages here, yes, but nothing in them. The next passage leads us to two templars. They get close to the door of their cage when they spot us. One is young, blonde, and handsome. The other is older, with dark hair graying around the temples. “Maker be praised,” the younger one says. “You're not those maleficarum. Did Meredith send you?”

“Not Meredith, no. Just a friend,” I comment vaguely. Fenris grabs a torch and brings it over to the cage so I can see the lock better.

“Where are the others that were with you?” asks Fenris.

The second templar, the older one, says, “We don't know. We were separated and fell down some sort of pit.”

“Sounds about right. Something similar happened to us,” I comment idly as I start working on the lock. This time, it goes a bit smoother. It's a similar style lock to the one before, and I have a sense of where the tumblers are. It isn't long before I have it open.

“I'll have to ask our dwarf friend how to send a prayer to the ancestors when we get back,” I say to Fenris, careful not to mention Varric by name. No need to get anyone involved in this that doesn't need to be just yet.

We finish checking each of the tunnels and find two more templars and two of the Circle mages. Two mages remain unaccounted for. One of the templars has a broken leg, and is now being supported by the others.

This mine seems to be riddled with those trap door style of traps. Maybe these were originally chutes that were used to transport things to a lower level? No, there probably would have been cart rails down below if that were the case, and we haven't seen any. Perhaps they were shafts that once sported ladders and the doors had been added later as the mine dug further into the mountain.

We take the main passage and it slopes sharply upward. It's steep, but manageable. The injured templar has the greatest difficulty, but eventually we all manage to get to the top. This passage is straighter than the ones below, and similar to the ones we had been in before we fell. My suspicion is confirmed when we round the next corner and step out into the hallway that leads the open square room.

The gates are still down, and the hidden door closed again, flush to the ground. Now that I know it's there, I can make out the seam of where it meets the floor. No way back that way, unless we can figure out the mechanism. No sign of Cat, either, much to my disappointment, but I can't let that get to me just yet. *I bet she's with Merrill and Varric.*

Now that we've found a possible way out, the two mages stay behind with two of the templars, the injured one and another. They will try to figure out the triggering mechanisms to get the door open. The blonde templar and the older one who had been with him accompany us as we move forward to
find the rebel mages and the other members of our respective parties.

Templar boots on stone - so much for stealth, I think, shaking my head. We develop a system. Fenris and I scout ahead, with me looking for traps. Spotting the trap doors isn't difficult now that I know what to look for. We avoid them easily, but there's no sign of any rebel mages, Circle mages, or our friends.

I'm starting to get worried, when I finally hear voices behind the closed door in front of me. I give hand signals to the others to wait and be quiet. I check the door for traps, then move up to listen.

“Those were templars down below. They're going to be missed sooner or later. We can't just keep them there,” says a high-pitched female voice.

A second female, this one with a lower voice, answers, “What do you want me to do? We can't exactly let them go, either. They know where we are now.”

“We could go back,” the first one says hesitantly.

“And face what they do to those who run away? I'd rather be dead.”

I sneak back to the rest of the group and explain what I'd heard once we're out of earshot. “I only hear two. Let me go in first to talk to them first. I'm a neutral party, they might listen to me.”

“You can't mean to let them escape? They're blood mages,” insists one of the templars.

“First off, do you know they are? Have you seen them do blood magic? Because I haven't yet. In fact, I haven't even seen a single spell from them, only one woman pulling a lever. Second, they're scared. If you march in there in all your armored glory, any chance we have of a peaceful resolution is gone. Let me at least try to handle this,” I insist.

He reluctantly agrees. What have I gotten myself into? I know I'm right, though. Any chance these women have of surviving unharmed is going to depend on me. I'd like to go alone, but the look on Fenris's face tells me that's not happening.

“Stand clear of the doorway,” I tell the templars. “I don't want them to see you until we're ready. Wait for my signal. Or fighting. If there's fighting, please don't wait for a signal. Fighting is the signal,” I cringe, and Fenris gives me another impatient look. I know, I'm rambling again. Ok, Norah, breathe. You persuade people all the time. It's like the Game.

That thought immediately calms me. Yes, if I can be a player in the Game, and swim with the sharks of Val Royeaux, then I can certainly handle a couple of silly, ill-prepared mages.

I whisper to Fenris. “Let me do the talking.” Squaring my shoulders, I open the door.

They are taken by surprise and immediately brandish their staffs. There are only the two of them; no one else is here. The room itself is another square chamber. The door I came in is one of three doors, one on each wall. Where a fourth wall would have been is a sheer drop off that I suspect is a old mining shaft. There is a glow from the shaft, giving the room a reddish light. My heart soars when I see a shimmering outline. Cat! So this is where you were, you curious girl.

“How did you get out of the pit?” asks one of the mages. That's the one who pulled the lever, the lower-pitched woman.

“Ladies, please; is that any way to treat the people who are trying to help you?” I ask, my hands in the air to show I am not currently wielding my weapons, although they are strapped to my back.
“What do you mean?” the other one asks. It's the high-pitched one who had been open to going back. *Good. You're the simpler one. You're my target then.*

“You already know there are templars here. I let them out, but I'd rather not involve them right now. Can we call a cease-fire and talk for a bit?” I ask.

“You're working with them,” accuses the other one.

“Not really; more like trying to keep everyone happy. Look, this would be a lot easier if we knew each other's names. I'm Norah.”

“I'm Cecily, and this is Verna,” says the high-pitched girl before the other can respond. Verna makes a disgusted noise.

“Notice I haven't drawn my weapons, Cecily,” I said, emphasizing my empty hands. “I really would just like to talk. There may be a way we can all find a way out of this without bloodshed.”

“I won't go back,” says Verna.

“Quite frankly, you're not even why we're here. We were hired to find out what happened to the missing Circle mages and templars. Right now, I care more about getting them out of here than I do about bringing you in.” *Plant the seed that you're on their side.*

“You'd just let us walk out of here?” asks Verna.

“Maybe,” I say, my eyes still on Cecily. “If you're sure that's what you really want? Life out here as an apostate must be really hard.” Cecily looks torn.

“Of course it's what we want. Anything is better than what that templar wants to do to us,” says Verna.

“One templar in particular? Can I ask what happened?” *Now we're getting somewhere.*

Cecily answers, “It's Ser Alrik. He's a terrible person. He takes the girls, and tries to get them to...to...” she stammers.

“I think I understand. And what happens if they don't?”

“They said the one girl was a blood mage and made her Tranquil. I don't believe it; I knew her. I think he did it so she wouldn't say no anymore,” she says, near tears. I carefully avoid looking at Fenris, but given his past life, this can't be sitting well with him either.

Verna speaks up, “As you can see, we can't go back. We heard about this place and its defenses so we came here.”

“What if I can help you?” I ask.

“How?” asks Verna, suddenly more interested.

“It just so happens I have powerful friends both in the Gallows and the Mage Underground,” I offer. “What if I were to talk to my friends and have them find evidence on this Ser Alrik and his abuses? Would you be willing to go back if he's taken care of?”

Verna looks skeptical. “What would we have to do for this?”

I lean in. “Let the other four captives go and we'll call it a deal.”
Chapter 27: Trading Favors

The templars aren't happy about the deal, but in the end, they accept it. They agree to post a guard at each girl's door until word is received that the investigation of Ser Alrik is concluded. This satisfies Cecily and Verna.

Varric and Merrill are fine, of course. They tried to find a way around the gates and got trapped in a different side chamber, the same as the other mages. Two women had managed to hold off twelve pursuers all by themselves without a single spell. I can't help but be amazed. The traps in this place are an impressive defense system.

That feeling pales in comparison to how happy I am when we finally see daylight again. Well, it's technically moonlight - it's the middle of the night when we reach the entrance and go outside, but I am relieved to see the sky again anyway. The knot in my chest finally eases up. No more caves for a while, I promise myself. I look down at the golden ring. It doesn't tingle again or give any indication that it changes when we go back outside. I hope that's a good sign.

We make camp right in front of the cave. The path is wide enough to accommodate us, and I have the feeling no one else wants to spend more time in the cave either. The uneasy truce is palpable, and the placement of bedrolls in camp reflects this: the templars are spread out around all of the mages. The mages from the Circle are together, but separate from the two runaways, and we have a section to ourselves away from everybody else. At least everyone made it out.

Now I just need to get word to Anders about Ser Alrik. He'll want to know about this. I can use the Friends of Red Jenny network. He wanted Red Jenny tasks, right? Here's his chance. He'll know it's from me anyway, but after his parting words, I'm sure he doesn't want to see me just yet. I sigh thinking about Anders. It's only been a little over a day since he walked out of my house in Lowtown, but it feels like forever. How am I going to do this?

Orsino will be easy to notify, I think, forcing myself away from thinking about Anders. I already have to report back to the First Enchanter about the mages, and I'll be going sometime soon for another lesson with Bethany. I'd say I earned my keep for a while with this fiasco. I need sleep. I lay down on my bedroll, back turned away from the others.

* * *

The templars and their mage charges take off the next morning, leaving the four of us to make the trip down the mountain at a slower pace. I explain to the others that I want to collect the herbs I need for my potions before we head back. I think I'm really just delaying going back to Kirkwall. I have an evening shift at the bar tonight, but I have some time before I have to go to work.

Merrill proves to be a wonder when it comes to finding Elfroot and she shows me what to look for. “It often grows in the partial shade of overhangs,” she explains, pointing it out. After we’ve gathered enough for at least a half dozen potions, we stop to clean up in a mountain stream, eat a quick meal, and finish our descent.

We go into the city through an entrance near the docks. We’re cleaner, but we must still really look a sight when we arrive back in town given some of the looks we’re getting.
“You're welcome to come tonight during my shift for that drink, but I'll be working,” I say to the others. “If you wait till tomorrow, I'm working my normal day shift again, I can join you afterwards.”

“We can wait. Isabela would probably be pissed if we didn't invite her anyway,” Varric says.

“Tomorrow it is, then,” says Merrill, nodding, before heading off toward the Alienage. I watch her hurry away. *I'm glad she came. I'm glad they all came.*

The three of us travel a bit further together as we're all headed the same direction. We're about to pass by the Qunari compound when we see Hawke, Anders, Aveline and Sebastian stopping before the gates. My eyes are immediately drawn to him, I can't help it. Anders looks like he's seen a fight: his clothing is torn, and there are scrapes on his arms and smudges of dirt on his face. Glancing at the others, it seems as though they must have had an eventful day while we were away. Anders spots me, eyes widening in surprise, then turns back to Hawke. He doesn't look back as they walk past the Qunari guard and into the compound itself.

“Hawke had business with the Qunari?” Varric wonders aloud. *Hawke...how long has it been since I have even thought of her?*

“I hope she knows what she's doing,” adds Fenris. “The Arishok is not someone to be taken lightly.”

“Sorry you had to deal with my shit show instead of being there for Hawke,” I say apologetically to Varric and Fenris, “but thanks for your help. I owe you.”

“Cookie, you've got to stop it with this gratitude stuff. You're giving me a toothache,” Varric says, a hand to his head. “You don't owe us; we wouldn't have gone if we didn't want to. It goes both ways, though. I'm calling on you if I ever catch up with my bastard brother, Bartrand.”

“Sure thing,” I say, smiling. “I'll have my Friends keep an ear to the ground.”

“It was impressive watching you talk down the mages,” Fenris says, “but I guess even such falsehoods can be useful sometimes. You were right to send them back to the Circle.”

“I hope so,” I say. I'm not sure if he's really talking about my subtleties with the mages, or my own revelation, but I'm happy either way.

We part ways near my house. Varric walks back to the Hanged Man a few blocks away, and Fenris heads toward the steps to Hightown. He gives me a last look, but doesn't say more before he leaves.

*Home at last.* I check my messages, close and bar the door, and get ready to take a bath. I'm a little sore from our adventure and sleeping on the ground, but I don't want to miss another shift at work right now. Cat fades in next to me.

“Cat, I am so happy to see you,” say. “You don't know how worried I was when we fell down the shaft and you weren't there.”

“I looked in on you, but I saw you'd be stuck down there for a while, and I got curious. I had to follow the woman. I figured it might help you later if I knew what she was up to.”

“Wish you would have warned me you were leaving, but I get it,” I say. “Maybe we need some kind of signal next time.”

I clean up and dress in my barmaid uniform. I feel a little better about wearing it today, as I have important work to do as Red Jenny. I scribble the note that will get transcribed by someone else later and delivered to Anders. *He'll know what to do about Ser Alrik,* I think. I also write to the Friends for
help in locating Bartrand. I drop both notes off on my way to work.

Night shift at the Hanged Man really is a different beast. The bar is nearly full tonight, and dodging in between tables has gotten my ass pinched more than once. At least one patron won't be walking comfortably for a bit, though, after I “accidentally” dropped boiling hot soup in his lap.

I've been hearing all evening about how Hawke handled a crazy elf who unleashed some kind of poisonous gas in an alleyway. Hawke herself is in the main room with Varric and some of the others. No Anders, of course. That's alright. It's easier to focus on serving and avoiding the pinchers without distractions. Hawke is being currently being toasted by some of the regulars. I try to ignore her.

Isabela is there, thankfully, and I manage to get a few minutes of side conversation with her.

“So, any news from your meeting?” I ask.

“Look at you, puss, not even any foreplay, just all business,” she jokes. “Speaking of foreplay, I heard a juicy rumor about you and a certain fugitive?”

I slump. “I guess it was too much to hope that people could keep a secret around here.”

“No judgment, pet. I had him once too, you know,” she continues. “It was back in Denerim a long time ago, so don't look at me like that. Not bad, I have to say. Of course, that was before he came as a package deal. You have to tell me how it was.”

“You want to know how it was?” I ask, playing into her enthusiasm. I lean in and whisper, “It was private.” She pouts. “It doesn't matter now, anyway, it's over.”

“I thought he was grumpier than usual,” she comments. “Well chin up, puss, it's his loss. To answer your question, though, no, my meeting was a bust. I'm back to where I started. If I get something new, I'll let you know.”
Chapter 28

Chapter 28: Lessons Learned

I leave for home after finishing my shift. I'm tired from serving the crowd tonight, and I know I have to work the day shift tomorrow. After going home, I remove my daggers, kick off my boots and fall onto the bed. I'm asleep within a few minutes.

A new day dawns, and I don't want to greet it. *Ugh, I'm exhausted.* I have a day with no work tomorrow, thankfully. I notice a couple of messages that had come in yesterday lying next to the door. Some business with the Friends, and another invite to the Gallows. I do want to talk with Orsino, but it will have to wait until tomorrow. I'm also looking forward to checking on Cecily and Verna, and having my next lesson with Bethany. But first, a grueling day of work, followed by drinking with Varric and the rest. *I'm tired just thinking about it.* No rest for the wicked, I suppose. I get out of bed, and realize I've slept in my uniform. It's wrinkled, but a few tugs and tucks and it's presentable enough.

I freshen up a bit, and fix my disheveled hair. Cat is watching me.

“You were really tired last night,” she observes.

“I still am, to tell the truth,” I reply, checking my appearance in my small mirror. “Good enough.”

“Can we go see the fruit vendor?” Cat asked. “I want to see if he has any new imported kinds.”

“Yeah, I could use something to eat anyway,” I say.

Cat fades from sight, and I open the door. Lowtown looks different in the mornings. It can be dangerous at night, but there's a calmness there in early morning. It's too late for the bandits and whores to be about, and the shops are just starting to open up for the day. The temperature is pleasant this morning, not too hot yet, and there's not a cloud in the sky.

After running our Red Jenny errands, Cat and I stop at the fruit stand and purchase a few things. I grab two pieces of fruit that are familiar for my breakfast and a couple of exotic-looking ones that I've never seen before to keep Cat's curiosity at bay a little longer. She doesn't eat, of course. I'm the one who has to try them, and describe what they taste like to her. They're usually awful. It's become a game of sorts for us sometimes in the mornings. *The pink mushy one today isn't half bad*.

Work passes uneventfully. Varric spends a great deal of time writing, but not in his book this time. He's sending out a lot of correspondence, looking for Bartrand. No one else from the group stops in, so it's just the usual—ale to the guy by the door, watch Corff and attempt to discover his well-hidden secrets. *I'd still like to figure him out. Or, maybe I'm just bored.* I yawn.

Afternoon finally hits and I'm able to go off shift. I consider going to change my clothes. My place isn't far, but I decide that I'm too tired for all that. Norah the Barmaid will have to suffice. I can wear regular clothes again tomorrow when I visit the Gallows.

The usual group gathers. Varric is already there, of course. Merrill and Isabela come in together, laughing about something. Fenris enters after them, followed by Sebastian. *Did we invite Sebastian and I forgot?*
Sebastian must have seen my confused expression. “I don't drink anymore, but I heard you would be singing and I didn't want to miss it again,” he says.

“What? No, I didn't say that,” I comment, and suddenly it becomes clear. “Varric, I don't suppose you have any idea how this rumor got started?”

“Not a clue, Cookie. But it's probably better to just give the crowd what they want,” he says, insincerity evident from his grin.

“Ask me again later. I'm certainly not doing it sober,” I say. *This is going to be a long night.*

I end up giving in to the pressure and sing one song. I take a risk and go with a ballad in Elvish. I'd learned the words by mimicking the sounds and I was worried my pronunciation was off, but Merrill clapped harder than anyone when I was finished.

Afterwards my face feels warm, and I'm comfortably fuzzy. I had only had a few drinks, but I'd started the day already exhausted. *I think it's time to go home.*

“If I don't get going now, I think I'm going to pass out right here on the table,” I say. I stand up, and give a little wobble, but gain my footing.

“Oh, no you don't, Cookie,” says Varric, concerned. “You're going to pass out in an alley if you leave like that is more like it. Can't have you being bandit bait; I'll see you home.”

“I'll do it,” says Fenris. “I was just thinking about leaving anyway.”

“Have it your way, Broody. Do you even know where she lives?” he asks.

“Guys, I'm just tired, not drunk, and definitely not deaf,” I comment. That thought strikes me as funny and I giggle. Okay, maybe I am a little drunk. But I'd only had about three drinks all night, I shouldn't be. “It's a couple of blocks, I'm good.”

“Oh huh, sure,” says Varric, and gives Fenris directions to my place in Lowtown.

The cool night air sobers me a little. I shiver. Fenris stops next to me. “You're acting strangely. Are you feeling alright?” he asks.

“I've been sleepy all day. I think I just need to go home and get to bed,” I say.

He puts a hand my forehead. “You're a little warm - it's probably a bit of a fever. You're pushing yourself too hard again, Norah.”

“I couldn't let them down,” I say. “Never had any friends other than her before.”

“Her?” he asks, confused.

I realize I'd nearly just given Cat away. I shake my head, trying to clear it.*Change the subject, Norah.* We're nearing my place.

“Fenris?” I ask.

“Yes?”

“Do you think Mother would forgive me if I give up on revenge?” I asked, and am surprised to hear the words come out of my mouth.*Have I really been considering giving up?*
We pause in front of my door.

“I don’t know anything about your mother, but if you’re anything like her, I think she’d just want you to be happy.”

A tear rolls down my cheek. He reaches up a hand and brushes it away with his thumb.

“Go to bed, Norah,” he instructs.

“Good night, Fenris,” I say, going inside and shutting the door.

* * *

I sleep like the dead, and awaken feeling much better. Maybe it had been a fever. I remind myself to stay away from the pink mushy fruit, just in case. I cringe, remembering singing the night before and having to be walked home. I bathe and dress, happy again to be free of the bar uniform. I go with a simple dress. I want to learn to train in more than just my armor. The night with Bethany fighting the templars taught me I need to be prepared no matter the situation.

Anders should have gotten the message about Ser Alrik by now, but there's no word from the Friends yet this morning.

The Gallows courtyard is busier than usual when I get there. Is it just me, or are there more shops than there were the other day? I don't really need anything, although it's a good reminder that I still need to brew up those potions. I'll try to get to it later today after my lesson. The usual people are about, the Starkhaven mages standing together. The Knight-Captain and his recruits. Oh, look, he does smile. Wait, he's coming over here. I'm confused. Why would the Knight-Captain approach me?

“You're Norah, correct?” he asks.

“Yes?” I say.

“Knight-Captain Cullen,” he says, introducing himself. “I understand we have you to thank for our lost patrol returning back from the mountains,” he says. Oh yeah, I had done that. I guess giving the mages my real name wasn't a very smart move.

“It was nothing,” I say, wanting to end the conversation as soon as possible.

“Not to hear them tell it,” he says, laughing. “I think the story grows each time I hear it—soon they'll be talking about you like you were Andraste herself.”

“A good reminder not to believe everything you hear, I guess,” and I give a chuckle. “I'm glad I could be of service.” I wasn't there to help the templars, but being stuck in a cage isn't a fate I'd wish on anyone.

“I don't want to keep you, I just had to meet this mysterious Norah I'd heard so much about.” The Knight-Captain knows my name. This doesn't bode well. So much for staying invisible.

“It's was a pleasure you meet you, Knight-Captain. Good day,” I say in farewell, and after seeing nod his head in acknowledgment, I turn to continue on my way.

I let out a slow exhalation, glad to be away from him. He's pleasant enough, for a templar, but given I'm an apostate sneaking into the Gallows to practice magic in secret, it makes me a little leery. I hope I can continue my lessons a bit more, but it might be wise to understand I should stop at some point.
Orsino is pleasant again in his greeting. We enter his office. “Thank you for your help in bringing the runaway mages back. I hadn't dared hope the four we sent with the templars were still alive, and yet here you come back with extras.”

“How are Cecily and Verna fairing?” I ask.

“Well enough,” he says. “They've had to be monitored closely, but I believe they are relieved to be back.”

“I'm happy to hear that. I was starting to think I'd made the wrong choice in sending them back here,” I say, then wince. “Sorry, I probably shouldn't have said that.”

“No, between you and me, I agree with you. Things seem to be getting worse in Kirkwall, not better. All the more reason I need to stay and protect them.”

“Are you aware of their accusations against Ser Alrik?” I ask.

“Mages and templars have enough reason to be suspicious of each other,” he says sighing. “There's always gossip, but it's not always easy to sort out the truth. I'm looking into it, but my power on this is limited. It's not an easy thing to prove. I'm tracking his movements for now, seeing who he meets with. If I learn more, I'll send word.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“You should probably get on to your lesson. I'll be in touch,” he says, returning to work.

Training goes really well today, and Bethany believes I have good control over the Winter's Grasp spell now. She gives in to my pushing after that and starts teaching me Haste. It's much different, definitely more complicated, but feels familiar. It's probably because it's in a school I've studied before. Elemental magic was new to me, but I have experience with creation spells already. It will take some practice, but I believe I can handle this one.

I bow to her, “Thank you, Maestro.”

We spend a few more minutes and I catch her up on what I know about the others. She asks about Anders, and I just evasively mention I haven't seen him much.

The trip back is easy, although Knight-Captain Cullen waves and smiles at me on my way out, which makes me nervous all over again.

I head home and brew my health potions. It takes several hours, but I think I do a decent job of following the recipe. No wonder these things are so expensive; they take forever to make. My batch ends up making seven potions. A few messages came for me while I was away—Red Jenny business. It's just now getting to be evening, I still have a little time. I reply to some of the messages, and head out to make my deliveries.

When I return, Aveline is standing at my door. I don't think I could have been more surprised if it had been the Viscount himself. “Aveline, what can I do for you?”

“Oh good, there you are,” she says, sighing in relief. “Varric sent me. We need you to come to the Hanged Man right away.”
Chapter 29: Tangled Knots

I go with Aveline. *So much for a relaxing evening*. It takes us almost no time at all before we're standing in front of the pub.

“I should probably prepare you for what you're walking into,” Aveline says, looking uncomfortable. “It's Anders.”

“What?” I ask, surprise creeping into my voice.

“He showed up a while ago, drunk as can be, and ranting to anyone who will listen about killing a girl. Varric has him in his suite, but we haven't been able to calm him,” she explains.

I sigh. “I don't know how much help I'll be. We're not exactly on the best of terms at the moment.”

“He's a friend of Hawke's, so I don't want to have to have him arrested or get the templars involved in this, but if he keeps it up, I'll have no choice. We need to do something.”

“Why find me and not Hawke?” I ask.

“I tried,” she admits. “Hawke's gone somewhere with Isabela, Merrill, and Sebastian. Varric is the one who said I should come get you, that you and Anders had a connection.”

“Let just get this over with,” I say, shaking my head.

Aveline and I go inside. I can hear him yelling before I even reach the closed door to Varric's suite. “You don't understand what I've done. There's no way I can live with myself now,” he calls out in a pained voice. *Breathe. Inhale.* I open the door and walk in.

“Thank the Maker, Cookie, I thought you'd never get here,” Varric says. Aveline steps in behind me and we shut the door. Anders is seated in a chair, head in his hands. Varric stands nearby, guarding him.
Anders looks up and sees me. His expression goes from angry to sad. “Norah.” That's it. That's all he says, but the one word says volumes.

“Hello,” I respond, trying to give him a gentle smile.

“Norah, please, you have to kill me. Justice and I have done something horrible,” he says, looking down at his hands.

“Shh,” I say, getting a little closer. “We can talk about that later.”

I take a few more steps until I'm standing next to him, and slowly reach out a hand to touch his head. He sobs, and I'm nearly pulled off my feet as he grabs me around the waist and buries his head against my chest.

“Great, you would be a clingy drunk,” I comment wryly, but put one arm around his shoulders, and run my other hand over his hair.

Varric speaks up, “I'm sorry about having to bring this to you. I know you and Blondie are...complicated. I thought if I brought him back here it would help, but he won't calm down, and I didn't know what else to do.”

I continue to stroke Anders's hair in a soothing motion. I sigh. “No, it's alright. If I can help him, I'm glad. But what's he talking about?”

“He got Hawke and me to go with him to confront that templar Ser Alrik, and it went to shit pretty quickly. Alrik and three other templars were there in the cave, and they were threatening a mage girl. We killed the templars, but Blondie couldn't get a grip on his anger and tried to kill the girl. He didn't, of course. Hawke managed to stop him in time, but he didn't take it well. Apparently getting hammered was his idea of coping.”

“Shit, that's partially my fault. I'm the one who sent him the information on Alrik,” I confess. “Wait, I thought Justice didn't let him get drunk?”

“I don't know, honestly; we haven't seen or heard anything from the big glowy stick-in-the-mud. After what happened, maybe he figured he owed Blondie one and took the rest of the night off. Or maybe it just takes a lot more liquor now,” says Varric with a shrug.

“We're going to need to get him out of here,” says Aveline. “He's attracted too much attention.”

“Fine,” I say, resigning myself, knowing there's only one place we can put him. “If you can help me get him to my place, I think I can manage him from there. He can sleep it off.”

I pull away from Anders, but he pleads, “Don't leave me.”

I take hold of his hand. “I won't. I'm here. Let's go home, alright?”

I stop to tell Corff I may be late for tomorrow's shift. His response is, “If you get him out of here, you can have the whole day.” Well, I guess that's one way to get a day off.

With Aveline's help, we make it back to my place without any further problems, although Anders has a death grip on my hand.

“Are you sure you're alright with this?” Aveline asks.

I sigh. “It's better than him getting arrested. We'll be okay,” I say, hoping it's true. She shoots me a
grateful look and before taking off.

Cat fades into solidity when we enter, but I give her a shake of my head. I mouth Not now. Tomorrow. She nods, and is gone.

Anders takes advantage of my momentary distraction. He curls his arms around my waist and nuzzles my neck. “You smell so good. Maker, I've missed you, love,” he says, his breath tickling my neck.

“No, no,” I say, backing away, fighting the instant arousal he caused. He's not thinking straight - he won't thank you for that later. “None of that; it's time for you to go to sleep.”

I awkwardly try to steer him toward the bed. It's no small feat; he's bigger than I am and not exactly graceful at the moment. We finally get to the bed, and he lays down, but he grabs my hand again and pulls me down with him. I slip my hand out of his grasp and move to stand up, but he snakes his arms around my torso and pulls me back down again.

I land on my back on the bed, and he pulls me closer, moving to lay on his side, with one arm thrown over me, holding me in place.

“Anders, I need to get up,” I say. I feel a pain in my chest like someone stabbed me. I can’t do this.

“Why? Is it because you're going to see Fenris?” he asks, jealousy coloring his tone.

“No, you idiot, it's because you broke up with me;” I answer.

He shifts, and suddenly I'm looking up at him, his blonde hair falling down to brush my face. The arm he had been holding me with is now above my shoulder, and he's using it to lean on as he meets my gaze.

“I broke up with you?” he asks, his expression confused and hurt. “I really must be an idiot.”

I laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of this situation.

He smiles down at me, and I'm struck by how handsome he looks above me like that. My humor dies flat. I feel a flush start in my face, and warmer sensations elsewhere in my body. I can't look away. He leans closer, closing the distance between us little by little. I can smell the liquor on his breath, but my racing heart doesn't care. I hold my breath in expectation for when his lips meet mine, but he pulls back. He rolls back to his previous position, the one arm still draped across me.

“If I broke up with you, then I probably shouldn't make love to you right now. Unless you want to get back together?” he asks hopefully.

“Ask me again in the morning, lover,” I say. “If you can manage to remember any of this, that is.”

“Okay,” he mutters quietly, and snuggles up next to me. Soon, he's dozing peacefully, a light snore coming from him.

It's a long time before my own body calms down enough for me to fall asleep.

When I wake this time, it's with a gradual awareness. Something feels good. Really good. Hands on my body. Wait, something’s not right. I open my eyes. The light around the edges of the window shade tell me that it will be dawn soon. Anders lies next to me, his eyes open again, watching me intently. I see what it is that woke me. He is slowly tracing his fingers upwards from the small of my waist over my rib cage, his thumb just barely brushing the side of my breast before returning.
His hand moves upward again, over my clothing this time, his thumb moves in a larger circle a little closer to my nipple, but doesn't touch it, building my anticipation. The third time, his hand covers my breast, and he uses his fingernails to lightly scratch me through the fabric. Oh Maker, he does know exactly how I want to be touched. A small cry of pleasures escapes me.

He buries his face in the side of my neck, and I hear him say, “Love, those sounds you make drive me crazy.” He trails kisses over my shoulder, his breath hot on my skin.

“Damn it, Anders, you're not playing fair,” I protest. I need to stop him.

“But this is my dream, I can do what I want,” he says, but then stills. Realization crosses his features. “I'm not dreaming this, am I?” he states, immediately pulling his hand back. He looks at the room, then back at me. “How did I get here? And how did we end in bed together?”

“I guess you don't remember anything then?” I ask, blushing. Everything in me is screaming for me to beg him to continue what he started.

“Did we...?” he asks.

“Notice we're both still fully clothed? No, princess, your virtue is safe,” I reassure him, although my sexual frustration probably makes it sound a little harsher than I mean it. “No thanks to you. You get handsy when you're drunk.”

“Maker, I'm sorry, Norah. The last thing I remember is nearly killing that mage girl and leaving Hawke in the cave. I fought back Justice in time, but I never imagined he'd let me get drunk.”

“Varric called me in; you were pretty upset and making a scene. We got you back here to sleep it off. Are you alright?” I ask, reaching for him.

He backs away from my touch. “Don't, Norah,” he says, sitting up. “I'm trying to do the right thing here, but it's hard enough without you looking at me like that. I should go.”

I put my hand back on his arm, stilling him. “What if I want you to stay?”

His golden eyes meet mine.
Rough Around the Edges

Chapter Summary

Norah and Anders have a talk, and Norah shares something she's been holding back.

Chapter 30: Rough Around the Edges

I can see indecision weighing in Anders’s eyes. Unfortunately Cat has horrible timing. “Good morning,” she calls. I allow my hand to fall away from where it was resting on his arm.

“Morning, Cat,” I say.

“Oh, did I come back too soon? Do you want me to give you more time?” she asks.

We both give an answer at the same time. My answer is a yes, his is a no. I look at him, disappointed.

“Norah, as much I wish it were otherwise, nothing has changed,” he says, standing up and moving away from me.

“Cat, why don't you go on to the fruit vendor and see what he has this morning?” I suggest. “Anders and I need a few more minutes to talk. Oh, but we're not getting any of those pink mushy ones; I think it made me sick the other day. I'll call you when we're ready.” She fades and her outline disappears from view.

Turning to Anders, I ask pointedly, “Are you so sure nothing has changed? When's the last time you remember Justice sensing me?"

He searches for an answer. “I don't remember. I'd gotten so used to us being able to feel where you were, but you're right, we haven't been able to in a while. When I was with Hawke at the Qunari compound and you showed up, I had no idea you would be there.”

“See? No more giant Norah beacon. It's because I've decided to give up on my vengeance against Hawke,” I say proudly. “As far as I’m concerned, she can make her own bed and lie in it from now on.”

He smiles for a moment. “That's great for you. What changed your mind?"

“You, mostly,” she admitted. “You asked me why I hadn’t done it yet, and I started to question whether or not it was worth it. I learned a few things about my mother that helped too, but don't you see? Justice doesn't have to fear my negative influence anymore,” I explain. “Everything has changed.”

“Yes, but if yesterday proves anything, it's that I can't be trusted not to hurt people. Justice took over and I very nearly took a life that I was trying to protect. What if it had been you?” he asks, anguish contorting his features.
“Anders, that girl would be worse than dead had you not been there, from the way I hear it. You saved her,” I stress, and continue on before he can say more. “If my mother had someone like you back then, maybe things would have ended differently for her.”

“Your mother...you’ve never really said much about what happened. I think I was afraid to ask,” he admits. “Will you tell me about it?”

“I only know a little. I don't have any actual memories of her, as she died when I was just a baby. Lady Colette only told me lies about her, so everything I know I had to find out on my own. I know her name was Nadine, and she was a Circle mage at the Gallows. When she became pregnant, she escaped, and ran to Orlais to be with her sister. She didn't want to give me up, and wanted me to have a better future. She was later caught by the templars and they dragged her back here to the Free Marches. They accused her of being a blood mage and were going to make her Tranquil, but before they could do the ritual, she took the option away from them.”

“I'm sorry,” he says. “Too many mages die at their own hand. The templars need to pay.”

“Hey, careful. Not all templars are like that. My father was a templar,” I say, and a realize I haven't really given much thought to my father.

“Seriously?” he asks. I nod.

“Yeah, apparently he stole my mother's phylactery and they ran away together. It was all very romantic. I blamed Malcolm Hawke for so long for not taking my mother away from the Circle with him, but I see now that my mother had her own chance at happiness with Ser Aron. My father, according to what I heard, loved my mother very much. And yet, somehow he didn't end up in Orlais with her. I don't know what happened between Kirkwall and Lady Colette's estate.”

“Is it possible that your father is out there somewhere?” asks Anders.

“Honestly, I haven't really thought much about him. Maybe? I don't know. I only recently learned about him from Orsino,” I say.

“You met the First Enchanter? Wait, that stuff about talking him into being a Friend of Red Jenny was a joke, right?”

“Partially,” I say, smiling. “He was friends with both Malcolm and my mother. He's been good to me so far. Our relationship is mutually beneficial. Oh there's something else: I've been sneaking into the Gallows and practicing my magic with Bethany.”

“That sounds like something Bethany would do,” he agrees.

“I'm even learning that wonderful Haste spell you use. I'm not very good at it yet, though,” I admit.

“It still can't believe you're an apostate. When I think of all the risks you take, I feel sick.”

“You're one to talk,” I admonish. “Anyway, there was a reason I brought it up. I don't want you to be too hard on yourself about yesterday. You stopped. You needed help, sure, but you stopped him, Anders.”

“I don't think I could have pulled him back if Hawke hadn't been there,” he says, sullen.

“So you need a moral compass. Hawke never should have left you alone after what happened yesterday. Let me be the one to be there,” I offer.
“It's only going to get worse,” he insists.

“If our time is limited, all the more reason to spend it together,” I say. *Just say what you're really thinking, Norah,* I think, but my heart feels like it's hammering in my chest.

“You'd be better off moving on without me,” he tries one last time.

“How am I supposed to do that when I can't even stop thinking about you?” I ask, and finally blurt out, “I love you, Anders.” For a moment, I experience a feeling of panic. *I can't believe I just said that.*

He stands, takes me loosely in his arms, and my tension eases. “I love you too. I probably should have said that before. I'm still convinced the right thing to do would be to leave you alone, but we both know that's not the way you and I do things.”

His lips gently meet mine in a long sweet kiss, and I melt. My heart is overflowing and I wish we could live in this moment forever. But Cat won't wait too much longer.

Anders has a tender look in his eyes after we break off the kiss. I smile wistfully at him and say, “I wish we had time for more, lover, but a bored curiosity spirit isn't something you want to see. What do you think about breakfast?”

“I'm ravenous. And hungry, too,” he says, grinning. “But love, are you sure about this? I mean, us?”

“I'll help you move in after breakfast,” I say in way of an answer.

He smiles, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. “All my life, I dreamed that someone would say the words you just said to me, but I'd never dared to really hope it could happen,” he says, his voice almost reverent.

“You were never offered breakfast before?” I ask, trying to keep my face neutral and not crack.

He laughs. “Yes, my long unrequited desire for breakfast. You ornery minx,” he says, hugging me again. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Oh I’m sure you’ve had a few ideas already. I know I have,” she says, grinning. “But breakfast first.”

But again, his expression turns serious. “I do need one thing from you, though. If there ever comes a time when Justice can't be controlled and I really am gone...” he says, implying his meaning.

“If I truly believe you can't be saved, I promise I'll see it done, even if I have to strike the blow myself.”

“Thank you,” he says, relieved. He's smiling again, but sadder this time.

“Ok, so about breakfast. Cat and I have this game I should probably tell you about,” I say.

***

We spend the rest of the early morning taking a stroll. The vendor has a different fruit this time, it's yellow, and he says you have to peel it to eat it. I'm starting to think maybe he's getting the weird ones just for me. I buy one each for both Anders and I. Cat's never had a second opinion on something before. That will be something new, and hopefully entertain her curious nature. It smells sweet, and I see Anders's face light up after he takes a bite. *This one's a hit.*
As it's getting a bit later and some of the shops are starting to open, we head to Darktown. Anders stops me once we're in the undercity. “It's been wonderful this morning, but we still need to be careful,” he reminds me. “I'm a known apostate, and the templars won't hesitate to take me in. Hawke's presence makes them back off a little, but I can't be seen too much out in the open without her. I'm sorry; you deserve better than this.”

“Anders, I knew your situation before I even met you. You don't have to feel guilty,” I say. “I'm no stranger to sneaking around. I can handle it. Come with me, though; I have something I need to show you.”

I avoid the path that would have led me to his clinic, and continue straight toward the far side of Darktown. He pulls on my hand, again stopping me. “We shouldn't go that way,” he says. “That area belongs to the Carta.”

“I know,” I reply, tugging his hand in return to encourage him to move forward. “I've got this - just watch.” He gives me a confused expression, but follows.

There are about three Carta guards stationed in the area. I approach their leader. “Garan, you cheap bastard, how've you been?” I say, moving in to complete a complicated handshake with him.

“Well I'll be a nughumper's uncle! It's good to see you, Norah. Business is good lately, but we haven't seen you in ages. You should come by tonight for drinks.”

“I just might do that,” I agree.

He gives Anders a strange look. “Who's your friend?”

“He's with me - he's good. In fact, he's probably going to be staying with me off and on. I wanted to introduce him to you in case he ever has to go to my place without me.”

“Yeah, alright,” he says a little hesitantly, but I know that the word will be spread.

I guide Anders to the door of my safe house and let myself in. We go inside the cramped space and he waits while I light a couple of candles.

“You never cease to surprise me,” he remarks, amusement in his voice.

“Gotta keep you guessing, right?” I tease.

“Am I ever going to have you totally figured out?” he asks.

“We can't have that. I'll have to come up with a few new surprises by then,” I chuckle.

Turning to him, I take hold of his hand and flip it palm-side up. I place a small metal key in his hand. “You are welcome to come here if you ever need,” I explain. “What's mine is now yours too. I may not have Hawke's money, but I do have some influence that I can use to protect you.” I reach into my belongings and place a larger key next to it. “And that's the one to my place in Lowtown. Welcome home.”

“Norah, love, that's the second best gift anyone's ever given me,” he says, closing his hand and raising mine to brush a kiss across the knuckles.


“I don't think anything could top the Warden helping me get my phylactery and freeing me from the
Circle,” he acknowledges.

“Remind me to thank her if I ever get a chance,” I say.
Ferocity of Spirit

Chapter Summary

Norah and Anders settle in to life at home together.

Chapter Notes

NSFW elements. Skip from one *** to the next to avoid reading it.

Chapter 31: Ferocity of Spirit

We pick up a few of Anders's belongings and head back to my home. He doesn't have much, and leaves a lot behind in the clinic. He plans to return there during the days while he can. Even while being hunted, he's still thinking about others. I think back on our first meeting. Well, the time at the Hanged Man, that is - I don't count him seeing me in the alley through the sewer grate. He had accused me of working for the templars. Who would have thought we'd be here together like this?

Cat joins us as we come in the door, as I expected.

“Hello Anders,” she says, “and hello Justice.”

“Hello Cat. Thank you for allowing me to stay here,” he says with a small incline of his head.

“I don't make decisions for Norah,” she says, her tone very serious. Something's up.

“Cat, what is it?” I ask.

“Norah, I can feel your happiness, but as much as I want you to feel that way, I think you know this isn't going to end well for any of us,” she responds.

“Because of my joining with Justice,” Anders clarifies.

“Yes,” she answers simply.

“Do you know a way to help them?” I ask.

“Aside from killing them? I don't, no,” she answers, and then turns to look at Anders. “Finding a way to separate should be your priority, though. I will do what I can to search for the answer, as well, but the longer you stay bonded, the more Justice's purpose will be twisted. You need to avoid overreacting to things. A vengeful heart will be the death of you and Justice both, and Norah will be the one to pay the price for your choices.”

“I have no intention of hurting Norah,” he says, “but I think it's already too late for me to let her go. I tried that already, and all it did was make me want her more. I love her. I will do my best to do right
by her, you have my word on that.”

Cat replies, “I've been with Norah since she was a child. She shows me new things and interesting feelings. I won't let you get her killed and take that from me.”

She won't let him take me from her? Cat sounds almost possessive. I've never heard her talk like that before. I know she didn't want me around Anders because of the risk, but is that all there is to this?

“We'll be careful, Cat. I'm not exactly defenseless. I've already told him that if it comes to it, I'll end it myself. I'm hoping it doesn't, but you're right about needing to research a way to get them apart. Orsino seems to know a lot about spirits; maybe he will know something.”

“I will speak with him then, and look a few other places,” she says, “I don't suspect I will return tonight. I will see what I can learn, but if you have need of me, call and I will be there. I'm sorry for last time.”

Again with the serious tone. Since when does Cat apologize? She's acting differently, and I'm worried.

Cat fades from sight and I tell Anders what I'm thinking.

“The nature of a spirit doesn't change. I'm reminded of what happened to Justice once he left the Fade. I think you're justified in being concerned about her.”

“What can I do?” I ask.

“Sweetheart, if I knew the answer to that I wouldn't be in this mess to begin with,” he says.

“Right, sorry,” I comment.

“There is one good thing about it though,” he remarks.

“What's that?”

“She's guaranteed us all night without interruptions,” he says, grinning.

“Well then, shall we discuss that dream you thought you were having this morning?” I ask. “I'd like to hear how it ends.”

“I'll show you,” he promises. “But I warn you, I don't think I can be gentle with you the first time. I've thought of nothing but you since the moment I left.”

* * *

To demonstrate his point, he grabs my arm and turns me, pulling my back up against his chest. One hand rests on my neck, holding me in place, but keeping the pressure light. “Do you trust me, Norah?”

“I trust you,” I say.

“Good, love,” he coos, his other hand roughly roaming my body over top of my dress. He pulls me even closer against him, and I feel the hardness of him against my lower back. He uses his fingernails again to scratch at me through the fabric. My body feels warm, and I instinctively arch my back, my nipples tightening in response.

He lets go of my neck, and we walk closer to the bed. He pushes me forward, till I'm bent over at the
waist, my hands resting on the bed, and he stands behind me. I feel my skirt being pulled up around
my waist and my panties yanked down. The warmth of his hand quickly follows, and he makes a
pleased sound when his fingers glide into my already wet flesh.

I feel his other hand twist in my hair at the back of my head. He pulls a little, bringing my head up,
my body propped up now by just my fingertips on the bed. A second finger joins the one inside me,
and he pushes them deeper. I cry out. He keeps me there as his fingers thrust into me slowly at first,
but building into a furious rhythm. I feel the tingle of an impending orgasm, but before I can come,
he withdraws his fingers. He traces small lines and patterns on the back of my thighs and buttocks.

A new sensation hits me and I gasp. What is that? It happens again. Oh Maker, that feels good. The
trails he is making on the back of my thighs sting lightly as he moves along, the pain only mild, but
different than the scratching he had been doing. “What are you doing?” I manage to get out.

“Magic. I take it you like it?” he asks, his voice deeper than usual.

“Oh yes,” I confess in a breathy whisper.

He releases the hold on my hair and backs away. I feel the cool air against my heated skin, and hear
him unfastening the ties of his robe. He pulls my panties down the rest of the way and I step out of
them. When I turn back around, Anders leans over me.

I fall backwards onto the bed, and he follows, gathering up my legs on his shoulders as he does. He
trails kisses along the length of my calves and thighs before moving over me. He enters me with one
quick motion. We both groan at the sensation.

“Sweet, sweet Norah, my love,” he murmurs. He leans down and plants tiny butterfly kisses on my
face, making me laugh. He captures the sound from my mouth with a long deep kiss before he starts
to move again, his hips grinding against me.

He's right, he's not gentle, but I can't help but get caught up in his passion for me. It's intoxicating.
My love. My elusive orgasm from before starts to build again. “Anders, I'm going to come,” I gasp.

“I'm close too, love,” he says, breathing heavy. As the shuddering wave crests over me, I feel him
stiffen as well.

* * *

After our breathing slows for a few minutes, he rolls over. I move away from him, stand back up and
straighten my dress. Anders looks at me.

“Sorry. I didn't hurt you, did I?” he asks, his voice wavering in hesitation.

“Don't you dare apologize for what just happened!” I say, and he flinches. I realize my meaning isn't
clear from my words. I crawl back up on the bed, moving into a position over him, and say with a
grin, “Anders, that was amazing. You'd better do that to me again or I swear I'll-”

I never get to finish my threat as he grabs my waist and pulls me the rest of the way down, silencing
me with his lips. I attempt to get back up, but he keeps his arms locked around me, and shakes his
head. “Stay with me,” he begs.

I settle in next to him, his robes still undone, and he plants a kiss on the top of my head.

“I never dreamed I'd meet a woman like you, Norah,” he says. “You make me wish for things I've
been told my whole life that I have no right to want. I'm glad that my intensity doesn't scare you.”
“I'm one of a kind,” I joke.

“Actually, you do kind of remind me of someone,” he muses.

“This had better be good,” I warn him.

“None better,” he assures me. “It's the Warden Commander. She's far more serious, of course. She doesn't tease like you do. No, I think it's more that you have the same spirit. There's something about her that makes people want to listen to her, to follow her.”

“Okay, maybe I do have a reason to be jealous of her. You care for her.”

“I do, but not in the way you're thinking. I count her among my closest friends, even though I haven't seen her since she left to fight at Amaranthine. Besides, she was hopelessly devoted to Alistair. No, I think I was more in awe of her than anything.”

“Thank you, but from what you're saying, it sounds like I'm not anything like her at all,” I say, smiling in amusement.

“Then you haven't been watching closely enough. I've seen the others defer to you, often letting you take the lead. Hell, you have a whole network of anonymous Friends at your beck and call. You're more like her than you think.”
The evening is spent rather pleasantly, with Anders and I making up for lost time. We both sleep through the rest of the night, with no nightmares this time. When I wake in the morning, I find him already watching me. I smile a sleepy smile, and he reaches over to gently tuck my hair behind my ear.

“Good morning, lover,” I say.

“It is a good morning,” he replies. “I wish this morning could last forever.”

As if on cue, I hear the small scraping sound of a note being slid under the door. “So much for that idea,” I say. I sit up, and grab my clothes. Throwing my chemise over my head, I walk to the door and pick up the message.

“It's from the Friends. They found Varric's brother,” I say.

“You had them looking for him?” he asks. “Never mind, of course you would have.”

“Guess you weren't there for that one,” I explain, shrugging. “I told Varric we'd try, but I really wasn't expecting anything yet. Bartrand must not be trying to hide very well.”

“I'm getting impression I miss a lot when I'm not around. But it's great that they found Bartrand. I have a few choice words I wouldn't mind saying to that bastard myself after what he did to us in the Deep Roads.”

“I should report back to Varric. He'll want to know this. I have to work the day shift at the Hanged Man anyway,” I say.

“I should get back to my clinic. I only stopped in for that short time yesterday,” he says, and we look at each other.

“Then I'll see you tonight?”

“Try and stop me,” he says, smiling. After fixing his clothing from the night before, he gives me one last kiss, and walks out the door. Much different than the last time he walked out without me.

My heart is light as I dress for the day in the loathsome uniform. I sigh, and wonder why I'm still working my day job. It started as a way to get dirt on Hawke, but I don't really need it anymore. I'll have to give some more thought to my future. I know I want to stay with Anders. He will probably need my help more as his problems with Justice get worse. Other than that, I don't really know where
to go next. It's a little scary, but exciting at the same time.

I'm not without financial resources. Selling information and working for the Carta both pay pretty well. I could probably exclusively do Carta work from now on and be able to keep Anders and I for quite some time. I also brought a small amount of money when I ran away from Lady Colette, but I spent most of it setting up the Red Jenny network and getting my two homes in Kirkwall.

Cat appears not long after Anders leaves. Her expression is still neutral. I miss her cheerful excitement about going on adventures.

“Hey Cat,” I say in greeting, smiling at her. “Did you learn anything new while you were out?”

“I went to see Orsino, but he didn't know anything,” she says sadly. “He says all they teach in the Circle is to stay away from spirits and never accept any deals they try to make. He says someone connected to the Chantry probably knows more, which is why they hold that information back from the Circle mages. He also suggested asking the Dalish. They don't have nearly as many taboos about working with spirits as the Circle does.”

“It's a start. Thank you for helping, Cat,” I say. “Want to go on an adventure? I may have one soon.” I show her the note from the Friends of Red Jenny.

“It would be good to have a distraction,” she says, giving a small smile. There's the old Cat.

* * *

It's a typical day shift again. The nameless man by the door gets his ale, and I talk to Corff again. Varric isn't in the bar, though. I'm surprised. The door to his suite is shut, and Corff tells me he believes he's in there with Hawke. **Perfect, just what I needed.** I may have given up on directly going after Hawke, but that doesn't mean I have to like her.

The door to Varric's suite opens and they both come out together. Varric looks annoyed, but then smiles when he sees me. I wave, but he follows Hawke toward the door.

“Varric, wait!” I yell, heading after him. **I don't want to do this in front of Hawke, but he needs to know about Bartrand.**

“What's got you all fired up, Cookie?” he asks, clearly surprised that I stopped him.

“I have news,” I say, and wait.

His expression shows he wants to leave, but he doesn't. “I'll meet up with you at the docks,” he says to Hawke, who waits by the door.

“Sure thing, Varric,” Hawke says, looking at me suspiciously. She saunters out, and I expel a pent-up breath.

“Make this quick,” he says. “We have information on the scumbag who's been killing the women in town. We need to move fast before he gets away again.”

“My Friends found Bartrand,” I blurt out.

“Oh. Why didn't you say something?” he asks.

“I am saying something, Varric. This was my first chance; you were cooped up in your suite all day,” I say, shaking my head in frustration. **Stubborn dwarves**.
“So where is my bastard of a brother? Sorry Mom.”

“He's back from Rivain and holed up in Hightown. The place looks abandoned, but my Friends saw deliveries going in there a few days ago, and got curious,” I explain. “He's in there, I'd put money on it.”

“Shit, Hawke's thing has to come first, but I can't wait too long to act on this. I'll call on you when it's time. You're coming with me, right?” he asks.

“Of course; we had an agreement. We'll finish it together, I promise,” I say.

“Remember you said that, Cookie,” he says. “It feels good knowing I have a bloodthirsty wench like you watching my back.”


* * *

I leave work after my shift and head home. Anders isn't back yet, but there are more message from the Friends of Red Jenny. Cat pops in next to me.

“News from Varric?” she questions, looking at the message.

“Not yet; this is just standard Red Jenny stuff. Except this,” I say, startled to see a message from the Coterie mixed in with the others. I have an uneasy truce with them, but I haven't had direct interaction in some time. The note states that they have information I may find valuable, and have a meet set up tonight. I need to go to this.

I decide it's best to go in prepared for anything, so I dress in my leathers. I'm just finishing sheathing my favorite curved daggers when I hear a key turning in the lock. The door opens, and and Anders walks in.

Confusion highlights his features. “Norah, love, I'd love to think this outfit is just for me, but I've only seen you dressed this way once, when you'd come back from a fight,” he comments, and I remember the day he'd been with Hawke and visited the Qunari compound. “What are you planning?” he asks.

“I have a secret meeting with a representative from the Coterie,” I confess.

“And you were just going to go without saying anything,” he states.

“Yes. I have a feeling this is important. But I'll have Cat with me to watch my back. She's better in a fight than you would think,” I explain.

“What would the Coterie want with you?” he asks.

“I'm not sure, but they haven't reached out for a while,” I admit.

“You're connected with them too,” he says, shaking his head. “I'm really not ever going to have you figured out, am I?”

“There are probably things I haven't told you, but you're the one person around here I've never actually lied to,” I say, smiling.

“I don't like you taking risks.”
“It's just a meeting; I can handle it,” I reassure him. “I'll be back before you know it.” I stand on my toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. He looks worried, but doesn't stop me as I head for the door.

“Let's go, Cat.”

* * *

I throw a cloak on before leaving the house and pull the hood up. Now that people know my name, it's probably better if they don't see me going into the Blooming Rose. That would make life a bit awkward for Norah the Barmaid.

My history with the Coterie is complicated. I'd first encountered them when setting up the Red Jenny network. They thought I was trying to encroach on their turf, and I was approached by one of their operatives. It was explained to me in no uncertain terms that if I poached the Coterie's prey, I'd pay for it in blood. Not the best first impression. It took some convincing to help them understand that my network was about something other than just thievery. There was a potential benefit in it for them, too. They decided that I needed a test to prove what I said. That's when I met Gemma.

Gemma is a medium-level street thief, who also deals in exotic poisons. Beautiful and deadly, which I guess can be said of a lot of Antivan women. But that night, she'd been the lamb, sacrificed for slaughter. She was suspected of being a traitor to the Coterie. It was my task to find evidence one way or the other, and they only gave me a day to accomplish it before they sent someone in to kill her.

Cat and I watched her closely. I asked around my network during the day, and gained a little information about her routine, but not much. That night, she went out of her way to go down what I know is a dead-end an alley at the docks. She was meeting with someone. I sent Cat in to listen while I waited outside the alley.

Cat made regular reports back to me. It seemed that Gemma's meeting was with another Antivan, who evidently was part of the Crows. Gemma's relationship with the man seemed to be of a personal nature, however, not a professional one. Cat retreated back to me again.

“He's her half-brother. The Crows sent him here on business, but he's hoping to leave them.” Can someone actually leave the Crows? I'd heard they buy or steal children from a young age and train them to be assassins. Not unlike my own upbringing, I guess. But whereas my bard training taught me subtleties of conversation and the niceties of high society, Crow training involves more study on how to efficiently kill and move silently.

So Gemma wants to help her brother. But how to prove it? I need to know who the brother was sent to kill. I didn't have any contacts with the Crows, but I could use my network to determine who in Kirkwall might have angered the Antivans. That would be a place to start. I'd have to move quickly - no time for sending notes this time. I went immediately to some of my more active Friends, and they spread the word. It wasn't long before I got a name: Lord Trabian.

I didn't much care what this Trabian person had done. I had a different target. I laid in wait for the would-be assassin, and I was not disappointed. As the brother approached the lord's manner, I'd stepped out of the shadows.

“Evening friend,” I said, startling him. “A moment of your time?”

He wasn't sure what to make of me. “I come with news of your sister,” I'd said, and his face was instantly wary. “Please, speak with me in private. I'll not keep you from your night's work if that is still your wish - after you hear me out.”
He followed me away from the manor. I walked ahead of him, but Cat was watching him from behind. If he tried anything, she would strike. It was better that way; he was more likely to trust me if he thought I wasn't guarded.

“Give me one reason I shouldn't murder you right now,” he’d said once we'd reached a secluded alcove.

“Because I'm not the one who wants to murder your sister,” I answered honestly. “I'm here to try to prevent that from happening.”

He paused. “I'm listening.”

“You are aware, of course, that Gemma has some powerful associates in this city?” I asked, and he’d nodded. I continued, “They're doubting her because of you, and they're about to make it very difficult for her to keep on living. You need to choose where your loyalties lie. With the Crows? Or family? You can't have both.”

He had slumped. “I was hoping to do this one job and fake my death in the process. The Crows never stop looking for you, and they're everywhere, no?

“All the more reason to have powerful allies at hand,” I’d pointed out. “Sign up with Gemma's friends, convince them of your sincerity. I have no doubt your insider knowledge of the Antivan Crows will be of interest to them, and there is protection in numbers.”

“You make a good argument. Join the competition and turn them against the Crows? The idea has merit.”

“I'm glad we had this little talk,” I said, turning to walk away. I could guess what he was going to do next almost like clockwork. When I turned back, the arm he had raised to throw a dagger at my back was pinned to the wall of the building with one of Cat's own knives through the fabric of his shirt.

“How did you...?”

“First lesson about Kirkwall: this city has eyes and ears everywhere. You need to learn to make friends and play nice if you're going to last very long.”

I’d walked away, throwing a hand up in the air in farewell as I rounded the corner.

I later found out that Gemma and her brother, Jaritt, had indeed followed the plan to join the Coterie. They made it sound as though it had all been Gemma's idea. That was fine with me; I'd still accomplished my task. They made Gemma my liaison if I ever had any business with the Coterie. I’d even helped set up the back room gambling that took place at the Blooming Rose, but I hadn't had much contact with them since.

Not surprisingly, it's Gemma who greets me in the meeting room.

“Norah, dear, pleasant evening, isn't it?” she says, grinning. What is she so happy about?

“Yes. Your note said you have information for me?” I ask, straight to the point.

“Always so cold. But yes, I do have something I think will interest you. You know your friend Isabela's a regular here, right?” she asks.

“I guessed as much,” I said. “Isabela's appetites are well-known.”
“She also has a big mouth, and let it slip that you're looking for Talon and his men,” she says. I blanch, then realize what she's said.

“You know how to find him?” I asked.

“Not exactly. I just caught wind of some kind of meeting going down on the Wounded Coast in about a week,” she explains, handing me a paper with the information and location. “I owed you for Jaritt, and I repay my debts. Now, we're even.”

Earlier, I had been questioning what I should do with myself. Now I had to help Varric confront his brother, tell Isabela about Talon's meeting on the Wounded Coast, and get information out of the Dalish or the Chantry to help Anders. *Life was much simpler when it was just me and Cat to worry about.*

I will worry about the future later; I still have work to do. For tonight, I just want to go home to arms of my fugitive lover.
Chapter Summary

Norah gets suckered into going on a mission...with Hawke.

Chapter Notes

Warning: violent chapter (don't know why I bother with the warnings, most people who follow my work know I write violence LOL)

Chapter 33: Ghosts of the Past

*I can't believe that prick of a dwarf talked me into this.*

Varric sent word first thing in the morning, letting me know he is ready to go after Bartrand. What he doesn't tell me in his message is that he also asked Hawke. They're both waiting for me inside Varric's suite at the Hanged Man.

"My two best girls," he says when we're all together.

"Varric, dear," I say, stressing the word, "may I have a word?"

I wait until Hawke is out of earshot before launching into him. "Oh no. No way. I did *not* sign up for this," I whisper furtively to him, hands in the air. I turn around to walk back out again.

"Actually, Cookie, you did," he says. I stop in my tracks, and when I look back, I have to fight the urge to wipe that smug look off his face. "You made me a promise. Unless you're going back on your word?"

"But work with Hawke? This is asking too much," I mutter, my shoulders sagging in defeat.

"Locked in a mine all night with Daisy, remember? I'd say this just about makes us even," he replies.

"And here comes the other lady in question," I announce, getting a little bit of joy in shutting him up for a minute. Merrill enters the doorway of the bar and heads our direction. *Thank goodness there's at least someone here I can stand to talk to right now.*

I exit Varric's suite, and find Hawke leaning against the wall, arms crossed over her chest. I ignore her, moving to greet Merrill instead.

"Hello Norah. Hawke, I didn't realize you'd be joining us," she says.

*You and me both. Keep a straight face, Norah. You can make it through this. You've faced far worse, right?* I know this is for Varric, but it's hard to summon a desire to help him after he tricked
me into this. *I'll just think of it as items to check off the list. Red Jenny business, as it were.* Yes, that thought helps. It was the Friends of Red Jenny who brought me the information on Bartrand's location. *I'm only doing this because I appreciated their help.* I feel calmer, and I even manage to make my expression politely pleasant.

“Shall we get going, or are we expecting someone else?” I ask.

“No, let's get this over with,” Varric agrees.

* * *

I allow Hawke to lead the way to Bartrand's estate, following the directions that I had obtained through the Friends network. I look to the side and see Cat's shimmer and feel reassured that she is still here.

The place does look abandoned, as the report had said. But, then again, my contacts are rarely wrong. Hawke opens the door, and soon as we are inside, we're immediately confronted by a half dozen hostile guards.

I pull my daggers free of their sheaths. *Perfect timing. A fight sounds great right about now.* My anger at Varric's little omission fuels me into motion. As it turns out, two lightning-fast women with daggers, an elf mage and a dwarf with a giant crossbow work pretty well together, but I have a sudden vision of Aveline with her large shield. *She would have been helpful here, too.*

I launch myself at the nearest guard, bringing both of my blades down at an angle and into his neck. When I yank them back out, I see the amount of blood and flesh that come up with the daggers, and I know I don't have to worry too much about this one. I move into position again, and hear, rather than see the body fall to the ground behind me.

I take a moment to watch Hawke. I've never actually seen her fight before. She's graceful, probably more so than I. Sophie trained me to go immediately for the kill, but Hawke's style seems to involve more slicing motions than stabbing. It's like watching a dance.

Another man comes up behind me, and I give a spin, grappling his arm, and toss him to the floor. I make a clean cut through his throat, ending his attack. When I look up, I realize a nearby door is now open, and there are more men pouring out. I ready myself, but I'm struck with a sudden weakness. The fight had barely begun, I know it's not from exhaustion. *It feels as though something is sapping my strength.* I look around, but the only thing I see is Merrill casting a spell.

*Shit, is she doing what I think she's doing?* My jaw drops; I can't help it. Neither Varric nor Hawke seem to be reacting to it. *They already know.*

But there is no time to think about this now, as the reinforcements reach us. I step forward to engage the nearest enemy. Having found our momentum, the next wave is easily dealt with. We take a moment to catch our breath.

“I can't believe you, Merrill; *blood magic*? What were you thinking?” I ask, my tone harsh.

“Yeah, she does that,” Varric says.

“It's no different than any other form of magic,” Merrill insists.

“I am so not having this conversation right now,” I say, putting a hand to my now aching head. “You and I will have a nice long chat about this later.”
“It won't do you any good; we've all tried,” Hawke adds.

I ignore her again, which seems to set her off.

“Ok, enough, what's your problem?” Hawke asks. “Everyone talks about you like you're a nice person, but so far, I'm not seeing it.”

“Oh, it's probably because I don't like you,” I answer truthfully.

“Andraste's knickers, what did I ever do to you?” she asks.

“Do you just want the first thing, or the last? ’Cause this could take a while,” I reply, and keep going. “I have my reasons, but now I think I just don't like you on principle.”

“Ladies, if we could continue this conversation later, I'd like to get to my brother before he sneaks out the back,” Varric interjects.

“You're right,” we both say in union, then glare at each other.

_Breathe. Remember your training. This is for the Friends. Their information has to be useful. It's not for Hawke, or even Varric. It's for the others._ I smile again, and move forward.

“I'll take lead,” I announce.

There's a trap in the next room. I spot it in time before anyone reaches it. Disarming it is tricky, but I manage. Of course, it would have gone smoother without both Varric and Hawke trying to give me advice over my shoulder. _Next trip I'm bringing more warriors and less rogues._

There are more guards after that, and after we deal with them, Varric comments, “What did my brother do to these men? They were completely out of their heads.”

I shake my head. _I'd like to know that as well._ Mind control is a very complicated thing, and usually only accomplished by a blood mage in close proximity. But there haven't even been any mages here at all. _How is he doing it?_

We enter a long hallway, and then a large square room. This area and the hallway outside are host to at least a dozen corpses, if not more. These aren't dressed like the guards, but more like servants.

“Bartrand, what have you done?” Varric asks of no one. _It's horrible. What is going on here?_

We make our way up the stairs. There are three doors. One to the left, one to the right and one in the middle. The layout of such places is familiar. In fact, I note that Fenris's mansion follows a similar model. The middle room there is likely where we are to find Bartrand. Glancing at the others, I nod, and we head for the door.

“Varric, is that you? Praise the Ancestors!” a voice says quietly. A dwarf steps out from around the corner.

“I know this man, he's my brother's steward,” Varric explains, and we relax a little. “Hugin, what happened here?”

“Varric, your brother...it's the statue he brought out of the Deep Roads. Bartrand said it sang to him. Even after he sold it.”

“I knew that damned thing was trouble,” Varric bites out. “And what about the servants?”
“He was forcing them to eat lyrium,” he says, horrified. “Said he would help them hear the singing. He even cut pieces from them while they were still alive. The sounds coming from his study have finally stopped. Surely they're dead by now, but those lunatic guards are still roaming the halls. I've been hiding in here for a while now.”

“Who'd he sell it to?” asks Hawke.

“I don't know; that's why we came back here. On his good days, he would want to be rid of the thing, but then there were other days...” he trails off.

Varric turns to us. “Bartrand's not exactly a nice guy, but this doesn't sound like my brother.”

“What's this statue he's talking about?” I ask.

Both Varric and Hawke look at each other, then it's Hawke that fills me in. “We found an ancient thaig down there - it looked like it had been untouched for centuries. That's where we found it. An idol that looked to be made of lyrium, but it was red.”

“I've never heard of red lyrium,” I say. The Carta don't know about this, either, or I'd know.

“I'd never heard of it before then either,” Varric admits. “Which is why we thought it would be valuable. That's when Bartrand up and shut the door to the thaig, trapping us down there. Maybe this thing has been influencing him all along.”

“If that's the case, then he may actually need help,” I say.

“Let's just find him first,” Varric says cautiously.

When we open the door, Bartrand is standing there, a crazed look on his face. “I'll make your blood and bones sing the song for me!” he yells. He breaks a flask at his feet, and a cloud of smoke rises up. I know that trick pretty well from spending time around Isabela, but I still lose track of him. He's good; this is going to be tough.

As expected, he ends up on the landing below. More guards run to to his defense. Hawke leaps over the banister of the stairs, diving into the fray, daggers already spinning. I get why people are impressed with her. I still don't like her, but she's a good fighter, I'll give her that. I run in behind her, kicking a guard down the stairs with a well-placed boot as I go. He lands ungracefully at the bottom, neck at a bad angle. One down, I think, congratulating myself silently. Bartrand appears behind Hawke, and slices at her from behind. Hawke dodges, but doesn't get out of the way completely, taking a minor cut to the side. I step up behind Bartrand, and go for his neck. He's fast, and I miss my mark, but I get a good gouge into his shoulder muscle. That ought to slow him down a little.

Bartrand turns to engage me, but I manage to parry his attack, my daggers clanging against his with a sound of metal scraping metal. He disappears again. Damn it, he's slippery. I turn, expecting him to go for my back, but he appears at my side, instead. Cat's there, her own blades sinking into his lower back, and she's gone again in a flash. Good one, Cat, thanks. I look to see if anyone noticed, but they're all engaged elsewhere.

Bartrand makes quick work of the guard who had distracted her from Bartrand, and returns to helping me. She spins, her daggers cutting a few gashes in Bartrand's thigh. He limps, and struggles to keep up his speed. That's it, slow him down. I duck under a low attack—which is saying something coming from a dwarf—sliding on my knees next to him, when I cut into the tendon of his heel. He goes down. Glancing around the rest of the guards have been taken care of, as well.
Bartrand kneels there, and puts his hands up. His expression clears for a moment. “I can’t hear it anymore. I just need to hear the song again,” he says, voice pained.

“Hawke, I don’t know what to do for him,” Varric says. Hawke shakes her head.

“I have an idea,” I say. “If this works, it will only be temporary, but I’ll do what I can.” A bard’s songs aren’t just for show. There is a sort of magic to them, in a way. Sophie had been an excellent teacher, and I knew many such songs. I kneel down near Bartrand and take his hand, stroking it soothingly. I start singing. The others look on in confusion, but don’t stop me. It takes a stanza or two, but Bartrand’s eyes focus, and he looks around in confusion. I continue to quietly hum, sustaining the effect.


“What do you remember?” Varric asks him.

“The last thing I remember was being in the Deep Roads,” he says, clearly confused. He looks around him in horror. “Please, Varric, don’t let House Tethras end like this.”

Varric looks to Hawke. “I thought he’d be bragging about how he sealed us in the Deep Roads. I don’t think I can do this. Maybe we can get him to a healer or something.”

Hawke looks torn. No you don’t, Hawke. You don’t get to decide this for him.

I stop the song. “This has to be your call, Varric. He’s your family.”

“Let’s get him out of here,” he says, nodding. Between the four of us, we manage to get Bartrand out of the house, and to an infirmary. We have to stop a couple of times along the way, and I sing to him. The hymn boosts focus and willpower, but such effects don’t last long. I wish there was more I could do for him.

“I think we could all use a drink after that,” I say once it’s done.
Gambles and Losses

Chapter 34: Gambles and Losses

The four of us end up back at the Hanged Man. Now I'm drinking with Hawke too? What a day this has turned out to be, I think. I throw my cloak back over my leathers until we're safely back in Varric's suite. On the way in, I notice that Isabela is absent again. I'd hoped to talk to her about Talon's meeting, but I guess I'll have to tell her later.

Once comfortably settled in, the questions start. “How did you know that singing would help?” Varric asks me.

“Because it works on Anders when he has nightmares,” I explain.

“Works, as in present tense. Then you and Blondie are...?” he asks, a bit astonished.

I nod, smiling. “He's living with me now.”

“So you're the reason he went all mopey for a while,” Hawke guesses.

“Don't talk like you know anything about it,” I counter.

“I know I look out for my friends,” she replies, an edge to her voice that suggests more than her words denote. “Even if they need to be saved from themselves.”

“Is that so? Then where were you the night he begged me to end his life?” I ask angrily, throwing the words at her. “He needed you to look out for him then, and you left him.” Hawke's expression changes from angry to something else—guilt or sadness, I can't tell which. As usual, you don't see how your choices affect others until you're confronted with it.

I've had enough of this. I stand. “Varric,” I start, “I'm glad we found Bartrand, but I'm sorry, I just can't do this. I'll ask Anders if he has any ideas about your brother's condition. Merrill, I'll call on you in the morning. We still need to talk. Good night.”

I don't spare Hawke another glance as I walk out of the bar.

* * *

I'm still furious as I walk home. I barely notice the familiar landmarks as I make my way back. Anders is already there when I let myself in, and he greets me with a smile that falls flat when he sees my expression.

“What happened, love?” he asks.

“That damned Varric, he could have warned me. I answered his message to go help him with his brother, but he invited Hawke, too. I tried my best to get along with her, really, but I just can't stand that woman.”

“You went along with Hawke?” he questions, surprised.

“Yeah. We found Bartrand. He was possessed by something,” I tell him. “Not a demon, but his mind wasn't his own. Varric said something about a red lyrium statue that they found in the Deep Roads.”
“What were his symptoms?” he asks. *Always the healer.*

“He was hostile, kept saying he wanted to ‘hear the singing’ again,” I say. “It seems this statue was somehow poisoning his mind. I managed to calm him, but he couldn’t remember anything after finding the thing. The things he did because of it, Anders...we were able to get him to help, but I fear he’ll only get worse. Any ideas that might help him?”

“None of a permanent nature, no,” he replies sullenly. “But you're alright?”

“Yes, just angry at Hawke. That woman irritates me,” I admit. *I need to let this go for now.* “Sorry, I know she's your friend.”

I sigh, and put my arms around him.

“Are you guys going to do that all day?” Cat asks from behind me. *Crap, I forgot she's here.*

“Maybe,” I say, and stick my tongue out at her. She laughs, and I immediately feel better. I miss talking to her when I'm in public, and it's really nice not to have to hide her from Anders anymore. “What are your thoughts on Bartrand? You saw him.”

Cat thinks for a minute before responding. She says, “We have lyrium in the Fade too. It exists on both sides of the Veil. The red lyrium—it's not supposed to be like that, and feels wrong. But I don't know how to help him. Maybe killing him would have been a greater mercy.”

“That was Varric's decision to make, not mine,” I say. Anders says nothing, but nods in agreement.

I go to check my messages by the door. I have one from Orsino. *It'll be good to see him and Bethany again. But first, I still have to go see Daisy, I mean Merrill. Great, now that damned dwarf's got me doing it.*

“I need to ask you something,” I start, directing my attention back to Anders.

“Yes?” he asks.

“Are you aware that Merrill uses blood magic?” I ask.

“Regrettably yes. She refuses to listen. You would think my story would be a cautionary tale about dealing with beings from the Fade, but she insists she knows what she's doing.”

“Merrill has contact with spirits?” I ask.

“Not beneficial spirits. Demons,” he says. He frowns.

“Why would she willingly do such a thing?” I ask, horrified. “I hate when demons find me in the Fade.”

“I don't understand it, either,” he admits. “At first I thought it was just that the Dalish don't differentiate between spirits and demons, but even her own clan doesn't support her actions. That's why she exiled herself here. She says it’s for her clan, but she puts us all in danger by her actions.”

“I have to try to talk to her. I don't care how much you want something, blood magic is never an answer, and demons don't offer anything without expecting more in return. She's wrong.”

“I agree, but I don't think you'll get very far with her. We've all tried.”

“Thanks for your advice. I think I know how to approach her now,” I say, a plan already coming to
mind. Anders and I prepare dinner together, and spend the rest of the evening home with Cat. *It feels nice—almost like a family.*

Anders has the nightmares again that night. I sing to him, and it's much faster this time that he's able to drift back off to sleep. *I think we're getting the hang of this.*

The next morning, I dress in my uniform. I don't know how much time it will take me with Merrill, but I have to work the day shift today. I also have a few Red Jenny errands to complete this morning. “Cat, it's time to go see Merrill. Are you coming?” I ask her.

“Actually, Norah, I think I will stay with Anders for the day,” she says, breaking eye contact. “He's going with Hawke today and I wouldn't mind keeping an eye on him after the last time.”

“I think that's a good idea. I can go see Merrill by myself and then go to work,” I say. “That's where I'll be, so come find me if you need me. Anders, are you okay with that?”

“Love, when I said I wanted a cat, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind,” he jokes.

“Think of it as a chance to get to know one another. Cat can be extremely helpful,” I suggest.

“I don't mind, really. You're entrusting me with the well-being of your closest friend. That thought alone makes me happy.”

* * *

After having had Cat watching my back for so long, I feel her absence like a hole in my heart. But, I do feel better knowing she's watching Anders since we won't be together today. I pledged to help him with Justice should something happen, but I can't very well do that if I'm not there. *That would make me no better than Hawke.* If Anders needs me, Cat will come tell me. I don't know why I didn't think of this arrangement earlier. I'm almost proud of Cat for volunteering to be on Vengeance duty. I send a secret hope that they do get to know each other better, as well. We're all going to be living together, after all.

My deliveries for the Friends are on my way, so I drop them off before heading to the Alienage. *I really do love this time of day. Kirkwall seems so quiet and peaceful.* The fruit vendor is out early, as usual. I wave, but shake my head when he invites me over. “But I have something new!” he protests. I reassure him I'll probably be back tomorrow to see his wares.

I make my way quickly to Merrill's door once in the Alienage. I knock, and she answers immediately. The look on her face says she isn't pleased by my visit, but she opens the door wordlessly and allows me to enter.

“Good morning, Merrill,” I greet her, attempting to sound cheerful.

“I know what you're going to say,” Merrill states, diverting my attempt at pleasantries. “You won't talk me out of it.”

“I had a talk with Anders, and I figured as much,” I reply, trying to keep the judgment out of my voice. “Help me understand why this is so important to you, Merrill.”

“Everything I've been doing, I have done for my clan,” she explains, and I remember her saying something similar before.

“What exactly have you done?” I ask, not really sure I want to know.
“I'll show you,” she says, and leads me to a back room of her home. There is a large mirror there. It's ornate, with winding scroll work on the sides. There is a thin fracture running down the middle of it.

“I assume that's more than a mirror,” I state. *What is that thing?*

“It's called an eluvian. It's magic, well, it would be if I could get it working,” she says. I can hear the excitement in her voice.

“Is it dangerous?” I wonder.

“No, I've fixed it. Mostly. I have the tool now that I need to try, anyway.”

“Is this more blood magic?” I ask.

“I was wondering when you would get to that,” she says, her enthusiasm fading. “Yes, I fixed it with blood magic. I'm sorry I startled you before. I thought you already knew.”

“You surprised me, but I suppose it isn't my place to stop you if you think this is important,” I said. A lie. I've told so few, it hurts to say it. Sorry, Merrill, I can't support dealing with demons.

“Can you tell me about the...spirit?” I don't mean to hesitate, but I can't help it.

“You can say the word; I know what you mean,” she says defensively. “All spirits are dangerous.”

*I should just come out with it.* “You know a lot about spirits. I'm searching for a way for Anders to be separated from Justice again. Is it possible?”

“I've never heard of such a thing; we usually just kill someone if they become possessed. Keeper Marethari would be know more, if you could get her to talk to you,” she says.

“Will you help me ask her?” I ask.

“Oh, I don't know if I could do that,” she says, suddenly nervous. “The Keeper, she...we'll just end up fighting. She doesn't approve of what I'm doing, or my working with the spirit.”

“Can you at least get me into the camp to speak with her?” I ask.

“Yes, I suppose I could do that.”

* * *

My heart is in my throat as I walk into the Dalish camp a short while later. Merrill came with me, just to make the introduction. Then, I'll be on my own to convince the Keeper to help me. I do have an idea of how to reach her, but Merrill won't like it, so I don't mention anything to her on the way there. We pass a stone archway, and the camp becomes visible.

I have a little experience with Dalish from trading outside Val Royeaux, but the Dalish camped here are not traders who had approached me. I am coming to them as an outsider, a far different position. I don't have much I can offer.

*Keep to the truth as much as possible.* When I'm faced with Keeper Marethari, I'm struck by how beautiful she is. *Do all elves age this well?* I've never really thought about it.

“You return, da'len,” the Keeper says to Merrill. “Might I hope that Hawke did not give you the arulin'holm?” she asks.

“No, Keeper, I have come on another matter,” she answers, and gestures to me. “This is Norah; she
wishes to seek the wisdom of the people.”

“And what wisdom is it that you seek?” she asks. Her tone is polite, and yet I can hear the hesitation in her voice.

“I seek knowledge of how to separate someone from a spirit,” I report, putting forth my thoughts directly.

“Any dealings with spirits carry great danger,” she states. “Possession is always a risk in such undertakings. What is it you hope to gain by such knowledge?”

“I have someone close to me who chose to willingly bond with a spirit. It's twisted both of them. I want to help them,” I say.

“You wish to help your friend. Are you sure that's all?” she asks.

Sorry, Merrill. “It would also help me protect Merrill, should it come to that.”

“What? Norah...” Merrill says. Her features are scrunched up into a frown, and I can tell I have just ruined any trust she had for me. “I thought you weren't trying to stop me.”

Keeper Marethari smiles then. “You are a good friend, indeed. I hope you manage to convince Merrill to give up this task. Very well, I will tell you what I know. Spirits can only enter a willing host, but once inside they can take possession of the body, leaving the person all but a prisoner in their own mind. I know of no way to force them out that does not harm the host. You might be able to convince the spirit that a different host would suit its purpose better, but if what you say is true about it twisting its nature, then it is likely already too late already for this. When someone becomes taken over by a spirit, death is usually a mercy.”

“Is there truly no other way?” I ask.

“Nothing of which I am certain, but those you call Tranquil also seem to be avoided by spirits. I do not know if this has been attempted on someone who is already possessed, but it might make the spirit lose their interest in the host. It is possible that it would merely anger the spirit, causing it to defend itself against a perceived attack.”

My face falls. Dead or Tranquil, I know which one Anders would choose. Is there no hope then?

Marethari, seeing my expression, says “Ir abelas. I am sorry I do not have better answers for you. Perhaps there is another elsewhere who would know more.”

“Ma serranas, thank you for sharing your knowledge, Keeper,” I say, using the few Elvish words I knew.

“May your journey be long, and may the Dread Wolf lose your scent.”

Merrill and I walk back to Kirkwall in silence. I know she must be angry with me for lying to her, but I can't quite bring myself to apologize. I'm lost in my own sad thoughts. We hurry back to town. I know I'm already late for work, but I can't summon a concern for my job a the Hanged Man.

Once Merrill leaves to go back home, Cat appears next to me. “Where have you been?” she asks, panicked.

I'm immediately on edge. Shit, I hadn't told Cat I was going to see the Dalish. “What happened? Is it Anders?” I ask.
“No, but he's worried sick, and with good reason,” she says. “It's Leandra.”
Chapter 35: Ashes of Dreams

Cat leads me back to my place in Lowtown. Along the way, she tells me that Hawke's mother has gone missing. Hawke suspects that she may have been taken by the same man who had been killing women in Kirkwall some time back, but doesn't have much in the way of leads on where to look for her.

We get back to my house and find Anders pacing inside. Blue light shines faintly through patches in his skin. Looks like Justice is active. Seeing me, the glow dies. He grabs me and squeezes me so tight I have trouble breathing for a second.

“Thank the Maker,” he says, his voice full of emotion. “When you didn't show up for work, all I could think was that he had you too.”

“No, love, I'm fine. I'm so sorry,” I say, putting my arms around him. “I went to see the Dalish about Justice. I should have said something. I wasn't thinking.”

“I never thought I'd want to see vengeful Norah again, but I would have given anything to be able to know where you were today.”

“I'm sorry,” I say again. “Where are the others? Are they out looking for Leandra?”

“Yes, but Cat said you were outside the gates and went to get you. She told me to wait here.”

“We should go help,” I respond definitively.

“Everyone agreed to check in at the Hanged Man. There should be somebody there now that can let us know what areas have been covered already,” he states.

We get to the Hanged Man, and it's so crowded we can barely get in the door. Seeing me in the entryway, Corff gives me a dirty look. I sigh. Might as well get this part out of the way. “I need to check in with Corff,” I say to Anders. “See who else is here, okay? I'll join you in a minute.”

I make my way over, dodging out of the way of a stumbling man, followed by a spilling tankard of ale, and finally, a mabari hound. What is going on here today? This is a madhouse. It's not even dark yet. I finally reach the counter.

“I'm sorry Corff. I know I should have said something earlier about being late, but a friend of ours is missing, and we think she's in trouble. I realize I'm in my uniform, but I can't stay.”

“I've already heard. Just go,” he grumbles, shaking his head. “But you owe me an extra shift this week.”

“You got it, boss.”

We join the search efforts, but it isn't us who finds Leandra, it's Hawke. I bet she wishes now that we had been the ones to find her. We learn that a renegade mage named Quentin was kidnapping and killing women with the intent to make a perfect replica of a woman he once loved. Leandra was just the last, the final piece to make his project complete. Hawke saw to it that he would never hurt
anyone else ever again, but it was too late for her mother.

My heart feels heavy when we get the news. Aveline is staying with Hawke. The others have all returned home. I remember wishing Hawke would suffer as I had, but I never could have imagined something like this. I feel a little sick, thinking about it. Anders doesn't let go of my hand again as we walk back home. I'm reminded of the night he had been drinking, how he had been desperate for reassuring touch, and let him hold it. When we get home, I immediately start writing a letter to Orsino, asking him to take care of Bethany, and letting them know that I will be there tomorrow morning.

I have to send the correspondence, and Anders insists on going with me. I guess there's no harm in letting him know how I handle Red Jenny business. I know the letter will get to Orsino soon. Once we return to my Lowtown place, Anders pulls me back into an embrace. I hold him and reach up to stroke his hair in a soothing motion. I know he likes that. Cat is there, her face melancholy.

“It's too intense again, Norah. The feelings. I'll be back in the morning,” she says. I nod. I recall her leaving when my emotions turned to sadness before.

“Let's go to bed, Anders,” I say, “it's been a trying day.”

We settle in together. He rests his head on my shoulder and lets me continue to soothe him.

“I feel horrible for Hawke, but I can't help feeling relief that you're alright,” he tells me. “Does that make me a terrible friend?”

“No,” I reassure him. “When Cat showed up in front of me when we came back to town, I thought something must have happened to you. I was happy to see you were okay, too. There's nothing wrong with responding to tragedy by treasuring what you have.”

“It was all I could do to keep Justice contained today, and then to find out that a mage was to blame for it...”

“A madman was to blame. It's just a coincidence that he was also a mage.”

“I don't know what I would do if you weren't here,” he says. He's silent for a while, then, “Did the Dalish know anything useful?”

“Yes, but nothing you would accept,” I admit. “Keeper Marethari told me that the only sure way is death. It's sometimes possible to convince the spirit to enter another host, or if the host is made Tranquil, it may no longer suit the spirit's purpose and it may leave of it's own free will if it is not too far gone.”

“Willingly become Tranquil or pass my mistake onto someone else? You're right, I can't accept those options,” he responds. Sighing, he says, “It was a fool's errand to begin with. We both know how this will end. There can be no forever for us, only borrowed time.”

“I'm not giving up yet, Anders. There's still the Chantry.”

“Will you sing for me?” he asks, ignoring my last statement. “I don't think I can sleep like this.”

I softly hum to him. Exhaustion overtakes us both, and we do manage to get a little sleep.

* * *

Anders is already gone by the time I get up in the morning. There's a note from him saying he is
going to check on Hawke then go to his clinic for the day. *Good, he needs something else to focus on.* I need to get an early start too, if I'm going to go see Bethany and Orsino and make it back in time for the extra shift I agreed to do.

“Cat?” I call quietly into the room. She appears.

“I'm going to the Gallows today. Can you keep an eye on Anders? He should be with Hawke right now, but will be going to the clinic later.”

“And you won't deviate from the plan without telling me this time?”

“I won't,” I promise her. “I have to be at my shift later or Corff will have my hide.”

The visit goes as planned. Bethany is distraught, and worried about Hawke. I reassure her that Aveline is keeping a close eye on her, and her other friends are checking on her as well. This seems to soothe her worry a bit. I hold her while she cries, but I can't stay long. I give her my condolences and offer to help her in any way I can.

Grief makes me uncomfortable. I haven't really had much experience with that kind of loss. When I learned about my mother, I didn't react well. At the time, I'd never really had anyone that I was close with except Cat. Now with Anders and my new friends...this makes it seem more real that I could be facing the same sadness. Anders's hopelessness last night got to me, and I'm scared of losing him. *Will I end up alone again?*  

Hawke is alone now. Her parents both gone, her brother gone, and her sister in the Circle. I should make an effort to be a little nicer to her. Just for a little while, though.
Chapter Summary

The group reassembles after Leandra's death and comes up with a new plan.

Chapter 36: Low Tide

Walking into the Hanged Man feels different today. Maybe it's seeing the normally gregarious Varric silent for a change. We don't really talk, but I give him a wave of acknowledgment. The drinks still flow, of course. People will drink to forget just as easily as in celebration. Otherwise, it's pretty boring. Usual guy by the door gets his usual ale. Have the usual conversations with Corff to pass the time in between the usual customers. The work seems to blend together each day I'm here lately. *Maybe I just need more evening shifts; things are more exciting then, at least.*

Anders stops by the bar in the afternoon, not long before I'm due to be off work. *That's unusual.* He normally only comes in if he's with Hawke. I give him a questioning look. “This is an unexpected surprise,” I say.

“I wanted to pick you up from work,” he replies, “and I was hungry.” *Since when does he pick me up at work?*

“Have a seat, I'll get you something,” I tell him, and head to the back. The stew isn't bad today, so I ladle out a bowl of it and bring it to the table where he is now sitting.

“I still have to work a bit longer, but there's honestly not much going on around here. Quiet day. I'll be back,” I explain. After I finish my shift, I sit down to eat a meal of my own with him.

“I'm surprised you're still working here, truthfully,” Anders says. “I mean, wasn't this job just a way to watch Hawke?”

“Yeah. I've been thinking about it a lot lately,” I say. “When I came here, I couldn't see past getting payback for my mother's death. I didn't really think about what came after. I'm not sure what else I would really be good at. Traveling minstrel maybe?”

“How about sailor?” asks Isabela, having walked up behind us. I glance up to see that she and Fenris came in together. I realize I haven't seen Fenris in days. I smile at him. His own smile is forced, and his eyes dart away. *I guess he's heard about me being back with Anders, then.*

“Well, I guess that will take me getting a ship again first,” Isabela continues. “My last ship was called the Siren's Call. It would have been fitting to have someone like you aboard. Seriously, puss, you have a voice like sin. Makes me think things...”

“Well, stop thinking them,” says Anders.

“Touchy are we? Interesting,” says Isabela, her mind working.

“Oh, I don't know, Anders. You got to sleep with her, why can't I?” I ask. Fenris laughs. I look at
him, and again he looks away. *Ok, this is awkward.*

“How did you know about...” Anders starts, then looks at Isabela. “Never mind, I can guess. But no, love, no one gets to hear the adorable noises you make but me.” I blush at that disclosure.

“See, you shouldn't have said that. That makes me want to do it even more now,” Isabela teases, wicked delight shining in her eyes. “What do you say, puss? Boys are boring. Let's you and I have a little private time, girl to girl.”

“That is not happening,” says Anders. His tone is dismissively neutral; I can tell he's not really angry. He is kind of cute when he's jealous, though.

“I'd let you watch,” Isabela adds, egging him on.

“I'll give it some thought,” I say, deliberately pausing. “The job offer, that is.” We all have a chuckle at that. *It feels good to laugh.*

“I've really missed you guys,” I comment, smiling. “Oh, I know it's not great timing, but it's good you're both here. I have something to tell you that I think you're going to like.”

“What is it?” asks Fenris.

“My network gave me a lead on Talon. He's got some kind of meeting on the Wounded Coast a couple of days from now.”

“I really could kiss you!” exclaims Isabela. “But I don't want to wake up jealous Mr. Grumpy over there and make him go all glowy, so I'll at least wait until he's not looking.” She winks at me.

“Are you sure it's a good idea to go after this guy?” Anders asks. “From what you told me, he holds a strange power over his followers.” *Again with trying to protect me? It was sweet at first, but now I'm starting to feel a bit smothered.*

“If he's that big of a threat, then we need to find out how he's doing these things and shut him down,” I answer, trying to reason with him. “I doubt he'll even be there himself; it's probably just some of his men meeting up.”

“I still don't like the idea of you going out there.”

“Anders, I've been trained to kill practically since I could walk. I can handle this. Besides, I'll have two of the best fighters I know with me,” I say, and gesture toward Isabela and Fenris.

“Better make that three, sweetheart,” Anders declares. “I may not be able to stop you, but I'm not letting you go without me.”

I sigh. *This is getting old fast. I'll try to talk to him again later when we're alone. No sense fighting in front of the others.* Isabela is smirking at me, and I'm a little annoyed that she's enjoying this.

We make plans to meet up the morning of and get there early. With any luck, we'll be able to get a good vantage point to watch the meeting and hopefully set up traps or an ambush.

We leave the Hanged Man after dinner. Cat pops into view once we're back home. She grins. “This is going to be fun,” she says. “We haven't been on a real adventure in a while.”

“I agree - I think I need this.”

Anders gives me a concerned look, and I can't hold it back anymore.
“Enough,” I say, frustration evident in my tone. “You need to stop doing that. I know the thing with Leandra scared you, and I love that you want to protect me, but it's too much. I've been taking care of myself my whole life; I don't need a babysitter.”

He frowns. “So that's how it is then? I'm supposed to rely on you, but when I offer help, it's rejected.”

“I'll have Cat's help, and the others'. I won't be alone,” I explain. “But I can't worry about them, and worry about you taking trying to a hit for me too.”

“I'm sorry, I'm terrible at this,” he confesses, face sullen. “I've never had anyone that I loved before. It was too much of a risk in the Circle. I can't lose you. I fear it would break me. No, I'm going, and that's final.”

* * *

Turns out it wasn't quite final, after all. Anders and I are stiff around each other for the next few days, barely speaking to one another. The night before it is time to go, Hawke sends word. She's been summoned again to go meet with the viscount and asks Anders to go with her. He makes me swear to take Cat, and promise to be careful before he'll leave to go meet Hawke.

When I get to the arranged meeting spot outside town, I am happy to see that Varric has filled in as our fourth. *I said I wanted to take fewer rogues in my party, but I'm relieved that both he and Isabela are here. I'll just let Varric handle the traps this time.* I twist the gold ring on my finger. That reminds me. I walk beside Varric for a few paces.

“Hey Varric,” I start, “how do dwarves thank the Ancestors?”

“I don't know, they just do,” he says. He sees my frustration and continues, “Sorry, I'm an Andrastian and I've been a surface dwarf my whole life. I guess they send a sort of prayer to the Stone, and thank the Ancestors for strengthening it or something. Why do you ask?” he wonders.

“Just curious.”

Isabela joins the conversation, “So, your bodyguard actually let you out of the house alone today?” I sigh. “Don't start, Isabela. I was just starting to enjoy this trip.”

“Now that he's not here, you mean?” she asks pointedly. “You know, puss, if he's not good to you, you can always end it.”

“It's not that, really,” I protest. “I can tell he cares, he's just being overprotective ever since the night Hawke's mother died. He said something once about trying to protect someone before and it not ending well. I think being with me reminds him of it, but I can't get anything done with him hovering like that.”

“So how did you manage to convince him to stay behind?” Varric asks. “Sounds to me like he was going to be stubborn ass about it.”

“Hawke needed him today,” I explain. “I guess it is good to get a little break. He can be intense at times.”

“Normally, I'd say intense is a good thing,” says Isabela, “but you've been far too serious lately. It's good to see you smile again. Make sure this is making you happy, puss, that's all I'm saying.”
I do smile at that. Isabela being concerned reminds me that I'm not alone anymore. I have several people who care about me now. “Alright, let's go kick some pirate ass, then!” I exclaim.

Fenris finally looks back at our group. I realize he's been walking ahead of us for some time. If he heard the rest of the conversation, he doesn't give any indication.
Chapter 37: Surging Seas

The location of the meeting is a lot further down the coast than we had gone the last time. We follow the winding trails down and around until I start to lose track of where we are. Thankfully, I spot a landmark indicated in Gemma's note that helps me find my place again.

I pause and check to see Cat's familiar shimmer. Good, she's still here. I sneak a smile in her direction.

We find the correct turn that takes us down a different path and closer to the sea, and finally out over isthmus to a larger piece of land. If the tide were much higher, the path would have been covered, and the land mass would have been an island. Fenris is in the lead, but I stop him, shaking my head. I mouth the word 'traps' to him, and use hand gestures to indicate the ground. He nods.

Fenris steps back and lets the experts go to work. With three of us familiar with traps, there is little chance that we will be surprised by any. I look up out of reflex, glancing at the treetops, and I spot something. A boot.

"Shit, guys, we have company," I call out, drawing my daggers as I move backwards. A pirate raider, clothed in the now familiar black and blue of Talon's company, drops out of a tree. We spread out a little, and more men drop out of the trees and come up the path from behind rock formations. There is a trap alright, just not the kind we had been looking for.

"That lying Coterie bitch," I spout out. "She set us up."

"Don't be mad, Little Wren," a male voice says, and I freeze. No, it can't be him. But my worst fears are confirmed when he steps into view. He looks a bit older than the last time I saw him, but I'd know his face anywhere. Nikolaus, my old teacher. That face has haunted my nightmares since I was a child. "When I heard my Norah was in Kirkwall, of course I had to come."

I look behind me, to see more men closing in behind us. Maker, no, he knows how to get to Cat. I look around for her, but I don't see her right away. I hope she's taken off already.

"He's the one?" asks Fenris from near me, and I understand his meaning. I nod. He grimaces, and adjusts his grip on the hilt of his claymore.

"I think you'll find I'm not a child anymore, and I'm sure as shit not your anything," I say, and I'm proud that my voice doesn't waver.

"My, my, a little songbird out of her cage and all grown up. Too bad you're still slow to learn. You'll change your tune by the time we're through with you." What's he planning? I wonder.
“Cookie, you know this man?” asks Varric from my other side.

“Not for much longer,” I growl out, and leap forward into motion. I don't get far, as two of Talon’s men jump forward to intercept my blades. There's a hissing sound of metal scraping metal, and I step backwards again. They don't follow, their intent obviously only to stop me.

“You forget, I know all your tricks, Little Wren,” he states. “And you're not the only one who's made new allies along the way. Come back willingly, and I will let your friends go.”

“Let her go with the creepy mage and brainwashed suicidal guards? Not likely,” says Varric, catching on. I really should tell the others the rest.

“Careful,” I warn them, “he's a blood mage.”

“Orlesian chevaliers, Tevinter blood mages; I really am writing a book about you now,” says Varric. “Help me get out of this, and I'll give you an exclusive interview.”

“There is one more thing you might want to consider,” Nikolaus says, grinning ominously. “No. It's remarkable really. I've never met a mage with as strong an affinity as yours for spirits before. I'd love to figure out how you do it. It's a wonder your little friend didn't possess you long ago.”

“Wait, what's he talking about, puss?” asks Isabela. I can't acknowledge that right now. I wonder what kind of expression Fenris is making, but I don't take my eyes off Nikolaus.

“Where is she, Nikolaus?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“Unharmed. So far,” he comments.

“Let Cat go, and I'll do what you want,” I say.

“That's not the deal, Wren,” he says smugly. “Don't think I don't know you'll just run again at the earliest opportunity. Not that it will do you any good - Lady Colette took measures so that we can always find you. No, your friend goes with us, to make sure you behave; the others can stay.”

“I need to see her first,” I insist.

“Norah, you can't be serious,” Isabela says. “This guy works for Talon. You saw what he does to those who work for him.”

“How do you think that snake rose to where he is?” Nikolaus shouts, tone haughty. “I think it would be safer to say that Talon and I work together.”

“He has my friend, Isabela,” I tell her. “The only friend I had for a long time. I can't let her get hurt,” I say, emotion rising in my voice.

“Enough talk, mage,” snarls Fenris. “No one is interested in your deals.” He gives me a reassuring glance. I wink at him, and his expression changes only a tiny bit, but I know he's received the message.

“Actually, Fenris...I have no choice,” I concede, sighing a little dramatically, moving forward, blades still in my hands, but I put my arms down and relax my stance. It's like the Game, Norah. Control your reactions, breath, inhale. “Show me Cat, and I'll go with you.”

We move as a group toward the center of the island. Cat is contained in a magical barrier, set with crystals at the edges. The barrier has a sickly purple sheen to it. Please don't let that be more blood
“It's okay, Cat. You're not alone anymore,” I tell her.

“Maker's Breath, Norah, is that what I think it is?” asks Varric.

I turn to look at him, and smile. “This is Cat, my dearest friend. My 'person to protect' that I told you about once.” I give another wink when the guards aren't looking and see Varric's eyes widen.

“Your friends seem surprised. I see you're still good at keeping secrets, Little Wren,” Nikolaus says. “If you're satisfied now, it's time for your first lesson. I need to you to prove that you can behave, if you want to keep your little spirit safe.”

“Yes, Master?” I ask, taking on the role of obedient pupil again. I keep my eyes on Isabela, and see her grip on her daggers change in recognition as well. *Good, keep playing along until it's time.*

He smiles sweetly at me, and I want to vomit. “I've dearly missed hearing you say that, Little Wren, but we'll need to clean up this mess first if we're to go back to the way things were. If we kill your friends together, there will be no one left to follow us.”

“Of course, Master.”

I take up my stance, daggers at the ready, facing my friends.

Fenris is the first to make a move, and he launches himself at Nikolaus. As before, Talon's men stand before him and parry his attack, but it's just enough distraction to put my own plan into action.

I grab Nikolaus's staff from his hands, and savor the feeling of elemental magic rising up within me. I release the Winter's Grasp spell and am rewarded with seeing Nikolaus's frame seize up, frost covering his body. His face is frozen in a state of shock. I switch from the staff back to my daggers and, crossing them over one another, slice his head clean off his shoulders.

Talon's men move in, no longer held in check by Nikolaus. I switch back to the staff, and cast that glorious Haste spell on all of us. Varric's crossbow unleashes a hail of arrows, seeming to come from nearly every direction. Most of the dozen or so men in the area are hit, taken out by the deadly fire. Isabela disappears and appears again in various spots throughout the battlefield, backstabbing those still standing. Fenris and I pick off whoever is left after the initial onslaught.

Seeing the devastation of the people in our immediate vicinity, the rest of Talon's men leave again, filing out calmly as they had done in the slaver's cave. I have a thought of going after them, at least to follow, but seeing Cat stuck in that barrier--not to mention my shaking hands--makes me change my mind. Isabela and Varric look at me with confusion.

I glance at Nikolaus's thawing body. “Guess I had one trick you didn't know,” I say between labored breaths, and collapse against a nearby tree stump, resting for a moment.

“Fuck, Norah, what was that about?” Isabela asked. “None of what just happened made any sense.”

_Guess it's time for the truth._ “I'm an apostate, and that man was my first teacher. The Orlesian men at my house were sent by my aunt, who wants me back under her thumb. I have no doubt she sent Nikolaus, too. I never thought I'd see him again,” I say sadly. “He wasn't a good man, as you may have guessed.”

“Is there any shit in this down that doesn't have something to do with mages or templars?” Varric
asks, “When we get back, I'm getting the whole story out of you this time.”

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, puss?” questions Isabela, a delicate wrinkle creasing her brow as she looks at the barrier holding Cat.

I nod. “Cat’s been with me practically my whole life. I trust her.”

Fenris hasn't spoken yet, but he looks at me, and he doesn't look away this time. “Is your friend alright?” he asks. No anger, no disgust.

Cat appears to be fine, but the barrier remains intact. It seems to be sustained by the crystals. There are seven of them in total, surrounding her.

“This barrier was made with blood magic,” I announce, sighing. “I don't know if I have the power to break it, but I have to try.”

I try smashing the crystals. It seems to have little effect. I hit the barrier itself, but again nothing. I even try casting spells at the barrier to weaken it. Nothing works.

“Cat, I don't know how to get you out of there,” I confess.

She mouths a word. I don't get it the first time, so she tries again. “Oh, lyrium! Right, of course. But Cat, I don't have any potions with me.”

She makes hand gestures and mouths a few more words.

“Nikolaus had some? In a box... below the ledge. Cat, you're brilliant. Hold on.”

I look up to find the others looking at us. I shrug. I should explain. “Cat is a spirit of curiosity. She's been immensely helpful to me in surviving over the years,” I say, relieved to finally get to tell my new companions about my earliest friend.

“A lot of things are starting to make sense,” says Varric. “Blondie knows about her, doesn't he?”

I nod. “Now you all do. My story isn't pretty, but there it is.”

“We all have a history, puss,” says Isabela softly. “Rivain wasn't exactly an easy place to grow up, either. If this guy did what I assume he did from that 'master' comment, then I'm just glad you cut the pig up before he could hurt anybody else. And if we struck a blow against Talon, so much the better.”

“I'm not sure how he knows Talon, but he did like hurting people. Living through that was bad enough, but when he threatened Cat, I couldn't take it any more. I'll do anything to protect her.”

“Do you have a way to get her out of there?” Isabela asks.

“She says Nikolaus kept some lyrium potions in his belongings,” I explain. “If I can get to them, it might help me break the barrier. I'm not leaving her in there.”

“Wait, are we talking treasure?” questions Isabela, suddenly interested.

“He was working for my wealthy Orlesian aunt, and now Talon. What do you think?” I reply, grinning.

We follow Cat's directions to a section up the beach. It's hidden from view on a lower ledge behind a boulder. I check it for traps, but find none. I guess he wasn't expecting us to be able to get out of his
ambush.

Opening the chest, I see something that deflates my enthusiasm. Not one, but two phylacteries. One guess who they belong to.

“So that’s what he meant by always being able to find you. They made phylacteries,” comments Fenris.

I grab them and stand up. Throwing the vials one at a time as hard as I can at the boulder, I get a small sense of satisfaction in seeing them shatter.

“There are probably more where that came from, you realize,” Fenris says.

“I know; I certainly bled enough for the two of them over the years. I thought once I’d killed him that this would be over, but it’s not,” I say.

The rest of the chest is filled with various weapons, armor pieces, jewelry, and two lyrium potions. The potions I take to help Cat. There is a nice set of daggers that I leave for Isabela - I still prefer my curved ones over anything else. I keep Nikolaus’s staff, though. It’s of better make than my basic apprentice staff. I allow the others to split the remaining loot. I don’t really have an interest anymore.

Heading back to Cat, I drink one of the potions, and reach out with a hand to attempt to cast at the barrier again. It shatters, much to my relief.

“Norah, I’m so sorry. I never would have gone ahead if I thought he was here,” she states, hugging me. *I forget how small she is sometimes.*

“I don’t blame you, Cat. I asked you to help today; this is my fault too,” I respond.

Cat pulls herself out of my arms as the others come back. “I’m Cat,” she says, introducing herself to my friends. “I’ve been watching you all for some time. Thank you for looking out for Norah.” She bows. The others just look on, unsure.

“I suppose you made better decisions about spirits than the other mages we know,” Fenris says, begrudgingly.

We head back toward town. It feels good being able to let Cat finally meet my friends, but now I feel an overwhelming sense of dread. If there are more of those phylacteries, I’m going to bring Lady Colette’s reinforcements right to my doorstep, home to Anders and Cat, and there’s nothing I can do about it.
Chapter Summary

After the shocking news, Norah doesn't want to go home...so she makes a different stop, instead.

Chapter 38: Respite

I wish the walk back to town took longer, despite the constant questions from Varric about Cat and my background. I don't relish the idea of going home to Anders and having to explain to him not only what happened today, but why I'm now a danger to us both. Well, make that all four of us if you include Cat and Justice. Varric and Isabela break off from the group, and head back to the Hanged Man. Fenris looks at me for a second, but then walks toward the stairs back to Hightown.

I pause, and decide to put off going home a bit longer. I start toward Darktown, and walk a couple of blocks when I hear footsteps behind me. I quicken my pace a bit, but I hear the steps pick up as well. Someone is following me. Panicked, I duck into a dark alcove and hide in the shadows. I wait, pressing my body back into the wall as much as possible. The footsteps draw closer, and Fenris's face pops into my hiding spot. I jump.

“Twitchy woman,” he says, smiling. “You can stop hiding now.”

My face heats with embarrassment, but I step out into the alley. “How did you know where I was?” I ask.

“Because it's what I would have done in your place. Is Cat here?” he asks, glancing around.

“Yes,” says Cat, appearing in the alley next to me.

“Nice trick,” he comments, smiling. Cat giggles. He continues, “Where were you going, then? That's not the way home.”

“I wasn't ready for that talk yet,” I explain. “You saw them, the phylacteries. It's only a matter of time until my aunt sends someone after me again. Next time, it will probably be someone worse than Nikolaus. I just needed some time before I tell him about it.”

“It's understandable that you were shaken. Every time I think of Danarius, my hatred takes over, but would it be so strong if I wasn't also afraid? That man had power over you for a long time, but you were able to face him today, and win. I hope I can say the same when the time comes for me to face my past.”

“It only worked because I wasn't alone.”

“True,” he says and becomes thoughtful for a moment. “But you didn't answer about where you were going.”

“Guilty,” I answer, being equally honest. “I have a safe house in Darktown. It's as safe a place as any
that I could go right now. I guess I probably shouldn't take Cat, though. Lady Colette already sent one person who could hurt her - she won't be safe around me. You won't either, for that matter."

"I'll take my chances, but if you're sending her back, you should send a message to the mage. He'll tear this town apart if he finds out the others are back and you didn't come home," he says with a dry tone.

*That's not a bad idea.* "Cat?" I ask. "Can you tell Anders I'll be spending the night in the safe house? Tell him I have business with the Carta that can't wait, but I'll be back in the morning." *My first lie to Anders.* The thought makes my heart ache as Cat nods, and disappears again.

"Business with the Carta?" Fenris asks with an odd expression. "Dare I ask?"

*It doesn't have to be a lie if I follow through with it, right? I could go see them and it would make it at least partially true. It's better than being sad and alone all night.* "Yeah, they know how to drink with the best of them, and I could definitely use a drink, or three, right about now. Ever been to a dwarven party?" I ask.

"No, I can't say that I have," he says with a chuckle. "Is that an invitation? A drink would be welcome."

"Why not? Oh, I guess there's something else I should tell you before we go, though."

"More secrets?" he wonders.

"A couple of them. First, I decided to give up on my revenge against Hawke. I thought you'd be happy to hear it," I say.

He smiles, and then says, "And the second?"

"Ever heard of the Friends of Red Jenny?"

* * *

Garan is on duty again in the Carta territory near the mine area, and greets me. After the complicated handshake, he asks, "Another friend?"

"Yep, but this time, we're staying for a bit," I say with a wink.

"Great! Telun's been asking about you, she'll be happy to see you again," he says, and ushers us further down the passageway. It's been a while since I've spent time with the Carta dwarves. I forgot how much of a community they really are. Shifty smugglers, all of them, sure, but it was like a big dysfunctional family.

I head in first, and I'm greeted multiple times. I introduce Fenris to the bunch, and eventually we sit down at a table. Telun is there with her father Benor.

"We're being honored with these seats," I whisper to Fenris. He looks a little uncomfortable with the boisterous crowd at first, but settles in when he realized they are mostly friendly. We're rewarded with some stories of recent heists and a few old dwarven legends.

A few drinks in, I turn to Fenris. "You know, something you said tonight stuck in my head," I tell him. "You said you have to face your past. I think you're right. I'm going to have to go back to Orlais to make it stop."

“That's a long journey,” he remarks.

“I know - I've made it before,” I remind him.

“Are you sure you want to leave Kirkwall now? You'll be gone at least a month before you can return - and that’s if you don't take long there.”

“I'll think about it tomorrow when my head isn't fuzzy,” I say, smiling. “But I think it's going to be the only way to deal with my aunt once and for all.”

“Then I'll go with you when the time comes,” he says.

“I can't ask you to do that. This is my problem. I'll do it.”

“You said yourself that you only won today because you didn't have to do it alone. You need someone there. Or do you really think he will leave the mage rebellion to its own devices for a month and follow you?”

“No, you're probably right, he won't,” I say. “Even if he does, we'll be hunted the whole way if they have my phylacteries. Being around me puts him in danger. He's too close to losing control as it is.”

“More decisions that can wait until tomorrow,” he says, raising his glass. I smile.

“Definitely,” I say and take a drink of my own.

Dwarven ale is more potent than the stuff I'm used to at the Hanged Man. I'm careful to take it slow, but I'm still a little unsteady on my feet when I go to get up a few hours later. “I think I'm going to my safe house,” I say, yawning. “You coming?” I ask Fenris. He's not much better when he stands, either. *Guess he's used to wine, not this stuff.* I'm a bit amused by the idea. I say my goodbyes, and we leave.

The two of us walk the short distance back to my safe house, stumbling and laughing. *I really needed this tonight.* I pull out my key. “I'll warn you, it's not glamorous like your mansion, but it's home,” I say, turning the key in the lock.

“My mansion isn't even mine,” he comments from behind me, and I give a small snicker. I walk in, and leave the door open. After lighting a candle, I set down my daggers and my newly acquired staff, pull off my boots and give a sigh of relief. I turn around, and Fenris is still in the doorway.

“Is it that bad?” I ask.

“It's not that,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “I've seen you safely home; I should be going back.” He sways a little, but steadies himself with a hand on the door frame.

“You're going to walk all the way back to Hightown? Like that? In the middle of the night?” I ask. He seems to waver. “Just stay here. Sorry, I don't have much in the way of comforts; I don't really use this place much.”

He walks in and shuts the door behind him. I look at my place. I have very little in the way of furniture. A narrow bed, one upholstered chair, and a small side table take up the bulk of the room.

“I'll take the chair,” Fenris says, heading that direction.

“Are you sure?” I ask.
“Don't tease me, woman. As tempting as it is to crawl in bed with you, you have a very jealous lover waiting for you at home.”

“Oh, right,” I say, blushing. “Wasn't thinking, sorry.”

I hand him one of the extra blankets from the bed and he settles into the oversized chair. I head back toward the bed, and mostly fall onto it. I manage to pull the covers up over myself, but I'm still dressed in my leathers from the day. It's not very comfortable, but it will have to do for the night. I blow out the candle, and the room is engulfed in darkness.

“Fenris?” I say into the darkened room.

“Yes?”

“Thanks for being there today. I'm glad you know everything now.”

He chuckles, and I imagine he's smiling across the room. “You're someone worth knowing,” he says. “Get some sleep.”

That's a command I can easily obey.

I awake with a start, my heart racing. There is light in the room, but it's not daylight - not that there's ever much of it in Darktown anyway. The candle has been lit again, and Fenris is kneeling next to the bed, his hand on my shoulder. Sometime in the night, he'd removed his breastplate and was wearing some kind of cloth tunic as an undershirt.

“What? What is it?” I ask, my breathing fast and heavy.

“You looked like you were having a nightmare, and you've been talking in your sleep for the last half hour or more. I thought it best to wake you.”

“I don't remember anything,” I say, shrugging. “But you're right, I do feel shaky.”

“You're probably better off not remembering. It didn't sound pleasant. Probably stirred up from seeing him today.” He stands, and I assume he's going to go back to his place in the chair, but he lifts the side of my blanket. “Move over,” he says.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Something foolish, no doubt. Now move over.”

I do as I'm told. He slides in next to me, and, after a little adjusting, I end up tucked under his arm, lying on my side. I try to keep my arm next to my body, but he pulls it across him, placing my hand on his chest.

“I'm not pushing you for more, Norah, don't worry. I just think we'll both get more sleep this way.”

“I guess it's not the first time I've slept next to you,” I admit, relaxing. “But don't tell Anders.”

I hear another quiet chuckle and he gives me a light squeeze in response.
Repercussions

Chapter Summary

Norah wakes up after a night of drinking with the Carta.

Chapter 39: Repercussions

When I awake next, there is light again, this time from under the door. The candle must have burned down in the night, extinguishing itself. I watch Fenris’s chest rise and fall with even breaths for a minute. I look up at his face in the dim light. *He looks so young when he's unguarded like this.* His white hair is disheveled and covers part of his face. His pointed ears peek out where his hair parts.

As if sensing my gaze, his eyes open slowly and he looks at me. I smile at him, and he smiles back, tightening his arms around me. The guarded look doesn't take long to follow, but he doesn't move. *What am I doing? Get up Norah, you have go home.* I sit up, moving away from Fenris, and immediately regret it as a sharp pain surges through my skull.

“Ow, okay, that's it - no more drinking for me for a while,” I mutter, holding my head.

“The dwarves do make a deceptively strong brew,” he agrees, stretching. “I haven't slept that well in ages.”

I move to get up, and Fenris does as well, giving me room to stand. “I need to get back; I'm sure Anders is worried,” I say.

“Yes, that is probably best,” Fenris adds.

*Dont't think like that, Norah. Yes, he's an attractive elf, but you need to go talk to Anders. You can't avoid it any longer.* I move to the chair and slide on my boots. I straighten my hair out as best I can, and pick up my daggers again. Holding my new staff feels good. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy casting. I haven't wanted to pressure Bethany because of her grief, but I miss having lessons. *Maybe I can have Anders teach me some things.*

Fenris had been getting prepared at the same time as I, and it isn't long before we are both ready to leave.

We exit, and I lock the door. When I look up, Anders is standing in the passageway, looking at us.

“So this is the business that couldn’t wait?” Anders says, hurt in his voice.

“It's not what you're thinking,” I start, but I know this looks bad.

“I tried, Norah. I tried to be there for you, to offer my help. You won't accept it from me, and yet you can turn to him?” he shouts.

“Let's just go home, I'll explain everything,” I try to placate him. *I really don't want to have this argument here.*
Anders grabs my wrist and pulls me toward him. “Do we still have a home together?” he asks, his eyes searching.

“Of course we do. I just got scared last night. There is something I need to tell you when we get home, but nothing happened with Fenris.”

“Just hearing you say his name right now makes me furious,” he spouts. He turns to Fenris. “I think you should stay away from her from now on.”

“That's the lady's choice, not yours, mage,” he says a little tersely.

“Let me handle this, Fenris. You should go for now. I'll see you later,” I tell him.

“As you wish,” he says, mouth tense, and he walks away.

Anders doesn't let go of my arm until we're back in front of my door in Lowtown. We enter together, and he shuts the door behind us. “We're home now, so tell me. Explain exactly what you were doing.”

“I will. I want to, Anders. It starts with what happened yesterday. The meeting was a trap. Nikolaus, the Tevinter mage who used to hurt me, was there. It turns out he's working with Talon. Or rather, he was working with him - I...killed him,” I finish, my voice wavering.

Anders's eyes soften, but he doesn't say anything, although I can tell he wants to. I continue, “But that wasn't the end of it. He had Cat in a magic barrier. I was so scared when I couldn't get her out at first, but then we found something even worse in Nikolaus's belongings: my dear aunt made phylacteries using my blood so that she can always find me.”


“My words exactly,” I say. “They can show up at any time, and they'll be able to come straight to me. I was too shaken last night to bear the thought of bringing danger home to you and Cat. I should have come home and told you, but I was afraid.”

“I've been on the run before under similar circumstances; you could have told me. Why would you be afraid to talk to me?”

“It's how you've been acting lately,” I admit. “Every time I turn around, you're trying to keep me home, or protect me. I don't know if it's just you, or if it's Justice being so close to the surface, but I didn't want to risk sending you over the edge.”

“So you went to him instead,” he says, the hurt returning to his voice.

“He helped me before when I was so lost in my own trauma I couldn't even move. The first time was while you were still in the Deep Roads. You haven't seen it, Anders, but it gets bad for me at times. I freeze and my hands shake, and I can't think or do anything. After facing Nikolaus...I wasn't good. Fenris's own experiences helped him know what to do to help me.”

“But you didn't have sex with him?”

“No, I didn't.”

He expels a sigh of relief. “When I saw you with him, I couldn't see straight. Maybe I have been pushing too hard lately, but I hate that you wouldn’t let me be there for you. Next time come to me first.”
“How did it go with Hawke?” I ask, suddenly reminded of why he hadn't been with me yesterday.

“How poorly,” he says, sighing. “The viscount's son was murdered. He wanted to convert to the Qun, and someone saw it as an opportunity to escalate the conflict with the Qunari. I'm afraid we weren't much help in the matter. The Qunari will not sit idly much longer.”

“What can we do?” I ask.

“I'm not sure there's much we can do, aside from prepare ourselves for the oncoming storm.”

“Sounds pretty familiar,” I comment, then have a thought. “Actually, what about leaving town? I was thinking if I go back to Orlais and confront my aunt directly; I could put an end to the threat from her.”

“Orlais? I can't leave Kirkwall now. The mages are in a more precarious position than ever with the Knight-Commander, not to mention the Qunari….Hawke needs me.”

“I had a feeling you would say that.”

“If your aunt sends more people, we'll deal with it.”

“There is one thing you could do for me,” I say.

“What's that?” he asks.

“I think I've mastered an ice spell. I want to try fire,” I say, a glint in my eye.

* * *

The next few days pass normally enough. Morning magic lessons with Anders in a secluded area outside town, which thrills Cat to no end; my day shift at the bar; evenings seeing friends. Isabela is missing from the Hanged Man again, but none of Hawke's crew seem willing to talk about it. I miss her. Once or twice I visit Fenris after work and learn how to play chess, although I'm terrible at it so far. Anders is true to his word and gives me a bit more space, which is a welcome relief.

I try to find Gemma, but she and her brother have disappeared. Figures. If she's caught word that I'd escaped her betrayal, then she has reason to worry. I feel a little of the old Norah coming back. I can live without vengeance on Hawke, but if the opportunity for payback against Gemma comes, that bitch sorely deserves it. I've nearly died at least twice now because of her and her brother. The rest of the Coterie gives no indication they were aware of her plans. I don't blame them; I wouldn't either, especially if I had something to do with it.

Cat and I chat about what happened with Nikolaus, and my talk with Fenris about going to face Colette. We establish a plan of action if I decide to leave. I pack a few bags with supplies, and stash them in a couple of places around town. One in my safe house, one in the seemingly blocked room at the Hanged Man. She's agreed to stay with Anders should it come to it. I think he needs her more than I do right now.

The only part of the plan that I can't figure out is how to tell Anders. He'll be hurt, no matter how I go about it, but I'm worried about Justice. If he knows I'm going to save him and the others, he'll want to fight for me, but Colette has a lot of resources. What if she sends more blood mages? Worse, what if she sends Talon himself with his mysterious ability to control others? I can't trust that Anders won't lose himself out of a desire to get justice for me. I doubt he would have made it through seeing Nikolaus. It's just too dangerous. Until we can find a way to separate him and Justice, Anders can't go with me.
I remember Fenris's offer, and I'm torn. If I rely on his help, I worry I'll end up hurting him, too. Not just the physical danger from Colette's people, although that threat is very real. I know Fenris is interested in more than friendship, although he hasn't pushed the issue. It's probably a better idea to avoid prolonged exposure to his company like that.

But I can't imagine any of the others leaving with me. Sebastian and Aveline don't even know about my abilities, and with Sebastian's firm beliefs about the Chantry, I can't see him helping a mage kill a woman and then continue to live life as an apostate. Aveline is too tied to the city guard to leave, and Merrill isn't speaking much to me. Isabela probably would have joined me just for laughs, but no one will say where she went. Varric's connections are here, including his loyalty to Hawke. I guess I've done plenty of things on my own, but this time I won't even have Cat with me. I'll be alone on this one, but I've done what I can to be ready.

I don't have long to wait. The next day is when the fighting with the Qunari breaks out.
I'm working my normal shift at the bar when it happens. We get word that the Qunari are terrorizing the streets. We get as many people inside the Hanged Man as possible, and bar the door. I run to the back room, change as quickly as I can into my leathers and grab my daggers. I'm so glad I thought to bring them. Cat went with Anders today, so I won't have her, though. I left my new staff at home, but I have my apprentice staff stationed here. I strap it to my back, just in case. I remember fighting the Tal-Vashoth before, and I am not looking forward to the coming battle.

I emerge from the back and see Corff has made similar preparations. We look at each other in surprise. He's carrying a longsword and a small leather shield with heraldry on it that I don't recognize.

"Nice weaponry, Corff; where did you get it?" I ask, a grin widening on my face.

"Nice outfit, Norah; where'd you get yours?" he asks.

"Fair enough. You any good with that thing?" I ask, looking at his sword.

"Yeah," he says, but doesn't elaborate. "You any good with that?" he asks, gesturing toward my staff.

"Nah, I just thought it was pretty," I joke.

"We're going to have to hold them off, protect the patrons as long as possible," he says.

I nod in agreement. Varric would have been a big help, but he wasn't in the bar at all today. I can only assume he was with Hawke when this shit started. We hear screaming in the streets. "We have to get out there, Corff," I decide. "We need to get to those people outside."

"Bar the door behind us," he instructs the nameless man who always sits by the door. Corff knocks in a particular pattern. "This will be the signal to let us back in. Can you handle that, Cameron?" The man nods, and Corff and I head outside. Cameron. His name is Cameron?

It's chaos already, with fires burning in the twisting streets. People are screaming and running. We usher a few more inside the tavern before Cameron shuts the door. We take up position in front of it just as a group of Qunari round the bend. Some of them are carrying struggling prisoners. The others engage us.

At first glance, Corff's movements speak to me of former military training. He had to be some kind of soldier. A knight, or maybe mercenary? I have little time to debate this, however, as a spear barely misses my head and lodges in the wall next to me. I duck and run forward toward the spearman. He's expecting me to swing high, but I go low, slicing across his thighs, bringing him to one knee. Corff swings his sword in an arc, splitting the Qunari down from shoulder to flank. The spearman falls to the side. I grin at Corff.

"We should have done this together a long time ago," I say.

"Focus," he says, looking behind me. I laugh, and twist to the side. Together we take down a few
more Qunari, but more and more are flooding into the street. Most are moving past us, and heading up toward Hightown. I don’t particularly want to let them go, but I can’t risk abandoning my post by the door to chase after them.

Exhaustion starts to set in, but we have no choice but to keep going. And then I feel a sudden sharp pain unlike anything I've ever felt before. I'm stunned, and my vision goes white. It clears after a moment, and I'm able to see a lightning storm going on around me. Magic. Shit. I've been struck by lightning. What did Fenris call the Qunari mages, Saarebas? Even he was worried about them. No wonder. It's another moment before I can move, and it's a moment too late. I take a hit from a Qunari hammer to the chest, which sends me flying.

I can't breathe, and I hear my daggers sliding away across the pavement. Using my staff as leverage, I manage to stand, breathing shallowly. Probably a broken rib or two. I cast Winter's Grasp on the Qunari nearest me, the one with the hammer. The movement sends shards of pain through my chest. The spell doesn't freeze him, but slows him down, giving me enough time to retrieve the closest dagger. I manage to reach up and cut his throat open before for the spell ends.

I grab my other dagger on my way to the Saarebas, but sheathe it along with the first. That creature is too dangerous; I need to keep it distracted if I'm going to get anywhere close. I quickly cast Haste to speed up my movements and Corff's. Time for something new. As Anders taught me, I summon a feeling of excitement, and allow my anger to fuel it a little. Unleashing the Fireball spell feels good. I see through the glow of the spell that I found my target. He's taken back a little. I hit him with a few standard spirit bolts along my path, then drop the staff and pull out my daggers when I get close. I jump on his chest, stabbing both of my daggers in at once, and ride it forward as the corpse falls.

Stowing my daggers, I pick the staff back up, casting a quick Heal spell. There’s not enough time to sustain it, but I can at least move a little easier. Huh, magic seems to work well against Qunari. As long as I can manage, I should fight with my staff.

I quaff the leftover lyrium potion I had taken from Nikolaus's chest, and feel a surge of power. I know I'm not practiced enough to keep this up for too long, but between my magic and Corff's blade, we're able to mow through a few more. Unfortunately, we aren’t able to rescue a single person. Some help we turned out to be. I glance up the stairs and wonder what’s happening to those that have already been carried or herded toward Hightown. What are they planning up there?

Finally, the flow stops for a bit. I'm able to cast a more sustained heal on both Corff and myself. I hand him a healing potion and take one myself. I feel a bit better, and my breathing gets easier as I feel the tissue mending itself. Resting against the wall for a second helps to recover some of my energy, but I bet I'm going to sleep well tonight.

We hear commotion again and ready ourselves, but it's a group of mages who show up. I recognize Bethany in the bunch. Her eyes widen when she sees me.


“What are you doing here, Maestro?” I ask.

“We came to help Orsino, but we haven't been able to find him, or my sister,” she explains. “Do you know where they are?”

“No, but the Qunari have been taking people towards Hightown. I'm not sure what's happening up there, but if your sister is around, my guess is she'll be heading that way too.”

“Thanks, Norah. Are you coming with us?” she asks.
“No, I have a bar full of scared civilians behind me. Corff and I will hold down this area.”

“Alright, we’ll see you after then,” she says, a sad smile on her face. *Does she not think she'll make it?*

“Definitely,” I say, reassuring her.

They leave, and it's just Corff and I again. “Do you suppose that's all of them?” he asks, not even mentioning my casting.

“I don’t know. We should wait a little longer before heading back in.” Nothing happens while we wait, although we continue to hear sounds of fighting in the distance. We eventually give the knock to Cameron. *I need to remember that name.* We enter the bar to cheers from the patrons. I plop down heavily into one of the chairs, not caring that I'm still wearing my leathers, and I'm splattered in blood.

Corff goes to bar the door again, but it opens before he can get to it. I'm instantly on alert again. Five men in templar armor storm into the tavern. *Templars? Shit, what are they doing here?* None of them are wearing helmets, but I don't recognize them from my trips to the Gallows or from around town.

I quietly head toward the back of the bar. I see the one in front look at something in his hands, then directly at me. *You have got to be kidding me. Colette sent five fucking templars to come get me? Maker, help me, I think I'm screwed this time.* I run for the hidden room, throwing the door open. I head up the ladder as quickly as I can, picking up the bag of supplies on my way. They burst in the door just as I raise the ladder through the opening. They glare up at me.

“Bring me a ladder!” the apparent leader shouts.

I've gained a few minutes, but now I'm trapped on the roof of the Hanged Man.
I need a way off this damned roof. I have the ladder, but it was meant for the slightly raised section in the back of the bar, not to reach street level, and it is too short to use on the side of the building. I look around for any other chance of escape. The back side of the building is a sheer cliff face, where Fenris and I had stood and looked out over the docks. That felt like forever ago now, but there’s no luck there. Two of the other sides lead to bare streets below.

The final side is a longshot, but a possibility. The rooftops are not close to the same height, so using the ladder isn’t feasible, but there are various awnings at different heights. Sounds like a recipe for breaking more bones today, but the only thing that awaits me if I stay here is the templars finding a ladder and me being dragged back to Colette in chains. No, I have to try.

I peer over the side again, aiming my jump. The first one is actually pretty far away, on the other side of the alley. Thankfully it looks pretty sturdy, and it's far enough down that I should be able to make it if I angle my jump right. Breathe. No hesitation. You can do this.

I back up and get a running start, and make a powerful leap off the top of the building. I hit the awning hard, rolling into it with my shoulder. I hear the fabric tear, and it sags; my breath catches, suspended for a moment before I realize it's holding. My weapons are still with me, as well as my bag of supplies. So far so good. The next few are a bit easier, and before I know it, I make the last drop to the ground. It's jarring on my joints, but I'm able to move.

I run. Faster than I've ever run before, but I can still hear the clang of armored boot steps behind me. Of course they knew I left, they have a sodding compass that points right to me. I run down one alley after another until I run into a blockade. Shit. I'd forgotten that they had these gates to close off in times of emergency. I guess a Qunari uprising counts. I'll have to backtrack. But there's no time. My pursuers are there behind me. All five of them block my exit. I realize my staff probably won't be much help against this many templars, not while fighting alone like this, so I go for my daggers.

I lunge under the arm of one, and he misses me, but his teammate grabs me by the arms, pinning me to him.

I raise my legs, kicking off the templar in front of me, the one I had just dodged. I feel a wrenching my shoulder, but I manage to make an acrobatic dive over the shoulder of my captor, and I'm free again.

There are just too many of them, and another sweeps his leg out, knocking me on my back. I land with a whoof as all the air is expelled out of my lungs.

I manage to hold onto my daggers this time, but I'm dazed from the fall, and they quickly disarm me. I feel myself start to panic. Not now, Norah. Use that energy, don't give into it. I allow the magic to fill me. Just like the first time you unleashed your magic. Protect yourself. Two templars are holding me down, while the others circle around.

One makes a small a gesture. The magic I am building dies within me, and I wait for the oncoming pain from the smite. It doesn’t come. Damn it, they’ve got me down and they’re still holding back?
I can't cast the spell, I can't get to my daggers. I'm alone, and they're going to take me. I do the only thing left to me: I scream.

The gate behind me blasts open with a rush of heat. Anders stands behind it. No, that's not Anders, that's Justice. Where normally Anders's eyes are deep pools of gold, they're now narrowed, and glowing a fierce blue. Cracks of blue light break through his skin. He is a sight to behold, my avenging spirit. One of two templars holding me lets go to face the new threat. Now's my chance. The templars still have my daggers, but I manage to twist and kick my remaining captor in the temple, and I scramble over and pick up my staff from the ground. I again use it to help prop me up enough to stand.

I'm exhausted, but I know I can't rest yet. My magic may be useless, but I'm not. I hit a templar with my staff just as he prepares to strike Justice with his sword, giving Justice room to retreat a bit further. I feel him cast Haste, and I grin. I really do love that spell. The templars don't seem worried about me and my staff with my magic nullified for the time being, but I'm a distraction, at least. My agility is useful in helping me stay out of their range, now that the odds are a little better.

Another figure comes from behind me; I turn to face the newcomer, but smile gratefully when I see Corff running up. His sword parries a thrust meant for me, and I allow him to intervene, stepping back out of the way. The templar with my daggers goes down, bleeding from several cuts. I grin as I feel my magic returning, and I cast Fireball for good measure. I'm rewarded with screaming. Running, in, I retrieve my daggers and finish the job.

Looking up, I see that the others are down as well. I check each one, cutting his throat if there are still any signs of life. I spit on the armor of the last one. Looking in his hand, I see my phylactery. I throw it on the ground and smash it under my boot with a satisfying crunch of glass.

Justice remains vigilant although the fighting is over. He looks around and swinging his staff. His aim stops on Corff. I step in the way.

"Anders, love, it's time to stop," I say, attempting to soothe him.

"I AM JUSTICE," he insists. "YOU AND YOUR TROUBLES ARE A DISTRACTION TO ANDERS. YOU KEEP HIM FROM HIS PURPOSE," he says in the booming voice.

"I know, which is why I'm leaving," I say, my voice falling.

The glow fades, and Anders is himself once more. I'd give almost anything to take the look from his eyes just now. He glances over at the bag of supplies near the side of the street where I had tossed it in the scuffle, then looks me in the eye again.

"You're leaving? Without me?" he asks.

"I have to," I say, waving a hand to indicate the dead templars at our feet. "This has gone too far already. I'm grateful that you came to save me, but Justice was right. If this continues, my problems will pull him out more and more. I need to find my own justice in Orlais."

Glancing back, I address Corff. "Thank you for your help today. I'm sorry, but I think I have to quit my job as barmaid," I tell him.

"Figured as much. It's always there should you come back," he replies.

"I'll keep that in mind," I say. "So...knight...Fereldan?"

"Redcliffe," he answers nodding. "I left after the town was overrun with undead. Crazy shit. I took
over the bar from some other guy here in Kirkwall and I've been running it ever since. And you, with that fighting style, I'm guessing Orlesian-trained...not assassin, must be a bard with that voice. The magic's a surprise, though.”

I grin. “Nice to finally meet you, Ser Corff.”

“Ack, don't let anyone hear you say that. See you, Norah,” he says, waving as he turns to go.

I almost wish I don't have to turn back around, but this isn't done yet.

“You can't follow me,” I say to Anders. “Not now that templars are involved. It's too dangerous. But, I'll leave Cat with you; she can help with your cause. She's great at gathering information and spying on people.”

“Don’t do this. Especially not without Cat,” he urges.

“My aunt already saw to it that she was in danger once. I can’t put either of you at risk again--I won’t. She’s better off here. As long as I’m gone, you’ll all be safe.”

“You're really going to go alone?” he asks.

“No, she's not,” says Fenris, descending the stairs. “She'll be with me.”

*Don’t react, Norah. Not in front of Anders. Just let him think this is part of the plan.*

“Where have you been?” I ask Fenris. “You missed all the action. Lady Colette sent sodding templars to find me this time. I nearly got my ass handed to me a minute ago.”

“It seems there was plenty of action to be found today. I just watched Hawke kill the Arishok in single combat.”

“Wow, that *is* impressive. I may not like her, but she deserves accolades for that one.”

“And she got them. They named her the ‘Champion of Kirkwall,’” he says, chuckling.

“Norah...” Anders says, pulling my attention back to him. “You're coming back, right?”

I look at him, his familiar handsome face. *This is the last time I’ll probably ever see him. It’s better this way. Cat can help him with Justice and the mages, and he won’t have to worry about trying to save me anymore.*

“I want to say yes, but the truth is I don't know,” I admit, not able to look him in the eyes. “It’s just as likely that I'll fail miserably and die trying to get to my aunt. Either way, I won't let Colette be a threat to you or my friends ever again. I have no idea how long this will take. I won't be able to send word, and if we're unsuccessful, I won’t ever be coming back. Don't wait for me, Anders.”

“You're breaking up with me?” he asks, exasperated. “No, I won't accept that. You can't leave me, not to go with *him*. Let me go with you.” He moves to reach for me, but I shake my head. What I really want is to throw myself into his arms and let him hold me, protect me. But this is the only way.

“No, Anders. I've already made my choice,” I say, keeping my chin up. *No tears, Norah. You decided this already. You can't both stay and protect him. You had to choose.*

“Let's go, Fenris,” I say, and he nods. *I'm sorry, Anders.*
“Fenris?” Anders asks in a small voice, stopping us both. “You'll take care of her, won't you? Protect her?”

“With my life,” he promises.

“Goodbye, love,” I whisper, and turn around. Fenris and I walk out of the plaza. I keep walking, afraid if I look back I won't be able to keep going at all.

We stop by Fenris's mansion to clean ourselves up a bit. He's as covered in blood as I am from skirmishes with the Qunari.

“Thanks for that back there,” I tell him. “Maybe he’ll actually stay if he thinks you’re going with me.”

“Norah, I am going,” he insists.

“Not you too,” I protest. “My aunt-”

“Aunt or no aunt, I made a promise back there that I intend to keep,” he states, interrupting me. “If you sneak out, I will just follow you anyway.”

I sigh. I don’t really feel up to fighting him on this. It really will be easier with someone else along, and Fenris has already offered to go. If I’m honest with myself, I’m a tiny bit relieved that he wants to join me. I help him gather the few belongings he’ll be taking with him.

It's already getting late in the afternoon, but I really want to get on the road as soon as possible. It was hard enough to get through that with Anders just now. I already feel the threatening sting of tears behind my eyes, and I don't want doubt to start creeping in if I stay too long. Thankfully Fenris is agreeable to leaving now, even though it's likely we won’t make it far before we have to set up camp.

We make our way down and out of the city gates. I take one last glance back at Kirkwall. The fires are starting to go out, evidence that the Qunari threat has been eliminated. People will be celebrating tonight, and hugging their loved ones in relief. But not Fenris and I. For us, there's only the uncertain future of the road.
The forest is peaceful as we travel this afternoon. It feels like we're a million miles away from Kirkwall already, and my breathing gets a little easier. It doesn't take long before the sun falls low on the horizon, and we start to look for a place to make camp. The quickest way to Val Royeaux would have been via ship, but my aunt surely has all the shipping lanes watched. We'd have been surrounded the moment we stepped off the boat.

I wonder how many more phylacteries she created. I was with her for years. In theory, she could have dozens. I know from Anders that the Circle generally only kept one on each mage. That's all they really needed to track them down. *I bet the Gallows has more than one on each now that Meredith is running the show.*

I have a map of the local area, another object I made sure I had in each of my supply bags. It shows a path close to the mountains that will take us on a fairly direct route. We'll have to avoid some of the bigger towns, of course, as my aunt could have spies there. I'm hoping it will take her pet templars a while to find me if they don't know where to start.

We stop for the night and make camp near an overhang of rock by a stream. It's nothing fancy, but we're able to refill our water skins and make a reasonable shelter for the night. When Fenris sets up our bedrolls, I'm not surprised that they are together. I look at him.

“Fenris, I'm not...I can't...” I get out, blushing.

“I know. I was just there to witness how recent it was,” he says with a smirk. “I also know I slept better with you in my arms than I've slept in a long time. I'm not asking for more than that. Will you join me?” he asks, sitting on the pallets.

I sit down next to him. “Yeah, I guess I can do that. You do keep the nightmares at bay. I could probably use that after today.”

We settle in next to each other, both on our sides, my back to his front. He has one hand under his head, his other resting lightly on my hip. I can feel his breath on the back of my neck, his mouth mere inches from me. It's more intimate than how we were the other night, and I feel a warm tingle of arousal. I try to dampen it quickly. *Maybe this was a mistake. Just go to sleep, Norah. Stop thinking about it.* I try to relax, and I'm only moderately successful.

“I'm happy you showed up when you did,” I say, trying to think of something to say to take my mind off things.

“Yes, the timing was rather perfect,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. It's clear he's thinking about how he had announced to Anders that I was leaving with him.

“That's not what I mean, and you know it,” I turn my face a bit more toward him. “I mean I'm glad it's you here with me.”
“Norah, if you don't want me to kiss you, you should stop saying things like that.”

I turn my face away immediately. “Oh, no. Sorry.” My statements are met with another chuckle.

“Just sleep. I can behave myself,” he mutters, then yawns.

My heart takes a few minutes to calm back down, but he's right, it is nice being next to him. I relax a bit more, and realize I do feel sleepy.

*             *             *

I wake to sunlight. It's a sight I'm not used to in the mornings. My Lowtown residence gets a little crack of light around the door, but never anything like this. There's a cool breeze, but I feel warm enough wrapped in Fenris's arms. I smile wistfully. _I shouldn't enjoy this. I know Anders and I aren't together anymore, but this still feels wrong somehow._ I turn slightly to look at him, and see that he is already awake.

“Good morning,” he says, smiling at me, and I can't help but smile back. It's so good to see him happy that way. It warms my heart. He's so serious most of the time, and I enjoy this side of him. He really is adorable in the mornings, with his hair all messy like that.

“You're doing it again,” he says, a hint of warning in his tone.

“What? I didn't even say anything.”

He sighs. “This is going to be a long trip.”

“Maybe we shouldn't do this anymore,” I suggest.

“I don't see you moving to get up,” he points out.

I do sit up at that, and he leans on one arm looking up at me. I meet his gaze. “Yes, Fenris, sleeping next to you feels nice, but you shouldn't let me use you like that. You deserve better than what I can offer you right now.”

I stand, and start gathering our things from the night before. I hear Fenris step behind me. He puts his arms around me and turns me to face him. He's not as tall as Anders, just barely taller than me.

“I'm sorry. I won't rush you - I know your heart is broken.” He leans in and plants a kiss on my forehead. “What we are right now is enough for me. Truly, you amaze me. You're fierce one minute, swearing vengeance against those who have wronged you. Then the next you look so feminine and vulnerable that all I can think about is kissing you. But I won't. Not until you ask me to.”

“Fenris...” I say. My chest is tight.

“I will ask you one thing,” he says.

I look at him and wait for him to continue.

“Can you honestly say you feel nothing for me?” he asks the question quietly.

“No, I can't say that,” I admit.

He hugs me to his chest. “Then I can wait, as long as it takes, until you are sure.” He lets go, but doesn't remove his arms. “It is strange. I've never wanted to pursue someone before.”
“Wait, what? You've never been with-” I start, but he cuts me off.

“That is not what I meant. You have to remember what my life was like before. I was a slave, and not free to make my own choices. Yes, there were liaisons, but never of my choosing. After, there were those who sought my company. But I never initiated the contact.”

“I think I understand. The bards in the great Game of Orlais are somewhat similar. Intimacy is just another tool to them, something you're expected to do as part of a mission. It's a way to get close to someone to get what you want from them,” I say sadly, and shudder at the thought, pulling away from him. “It's an ugly thought for something that's supposed to be meaningful.”

I think for a moment about how I had grown up. “I wonder what my life would have been like if my parents had made good on their plans to run away together.”

“You asked me once about your mother, but I don't really know anything about her,” he says.

“Oh, I haven't told you about her? I thought I had. I thought everyone knew by now.”

We finish gathering our things, break camp, and I tell him the tale as we walk. “It all starts with a wealthy Orlesian noble family, the Tromperies. They were shocked when their youngest daughter, Nadine, developed magic, as no one in the family had the gift for generations...”

* * * *

“...and I still don't know what happened to Ser Aron,” I say, concluding the story. “All I know is that there's no record of him actually making it to Orlais. It's possible he still lives, but Orsino seemed to doubt it. He believes he wouldn't have left my mother if he had an option.”

“I guess your story explains why you blamed Hawke for so long. I'm glad you were able to find peace with it.”

“Hey, I still think she's an arrogant jerk and doesn't think enough about others. I just don't feel a need to do anything about it anymore,” I reply, and shrug.

“Varric was right. Your life would make a good book,” he teases.

“Now there's nothing left that you don't know,” I say. “Of course, I thought that already, and apparently I left a few things out.”

“I'm sure there's still plenty I have still to learn about you,” he states. His tone is neutral, but I blush anyway at the implication.

“What about you?” I ask. “Have you remembered any more about your past?”

“Some. There was a woman, Hadriana. She was an apprentice to Danarius,” he says. “I encountered her not long ago with Hawke. She was as much a monster as your Nikolaus. I killed her, but before she died she mentioned that I have a sister who still lives. It would be easier to believe she was lying, but what if she wasn't?”

“Then we both may have family out there. I think that's a nice thought,” I say. “But whatever happens, you aren't alone, Fenris. You have me, and the others. That's the thought that got me through my fight with Nikolaus. It was just me and Cat for so long. After meeting everyone, suddenly I realized I didn't have to be alone anymore, and it changed my life.”

“Seeing things through your eyes is intriguing,” he says. “All I see is another way that Danarius
could be toying with me.”

“Then if you find her, I'll go with you. Danarius will have to go through me if he wants you,” I promise.

“You once said you’re not a good person,” he starts. “But that's not true.”

“You didn't know me very well then,” I protest. “I considered giving you over myself when I first learned who you were. I have a few Tevinter contacts I could have called in from my days in the Game. It would have been dangerous, and probably tipped my hand to Colette, but I would have done anything back then to hurt Hawke. I'm sorry. Once I got to know you, I knew I couldn't do it. It wasn't worth hurting everyone else. But if Colette is no longer an issue, maybe those same contacts could help us find your sister, or Danarius.”

“I'd like that. Maybe one day I can let go as well, and have a new life not tied to my past.”

“A worthy goal,” I say and we smile at each other.

Chapter End Notes

If Norah's reactions seem a bit quick, just wait, more is explained in further chapters.
Late in the afternoon, we come across a small out-of-the-way inn. Rest and a drink sounds inviting after a full day on the road. As we approach, we notice a man pacing outside, looking frantic. He catches sight of us.

“Maker's Breath, where have you been?” he asks us.

“Excuse me? You must have the wrong people. I assume you’re expecting someone?” I question.

“Oh, damn. I thought with his stage makeup that you must be the musicians that were supposed to show up over two hours ago,” he answers, and I snicker.

Stage makeup? I cast a glance at Fenris, who gives me a wry smile. The man continues, “I've got a full house who are about to ask for their money back.”

“So you need an act, right?” I clarify. Fenris gives me a disapproving frown. I shrug. “What? I'm hungry. Dinner and a room for the night sounds better than trail rations and camping.”

“You can perform?” the man asks. “That would be a huge help. We had a room and payment ready for the other group, it's yours. Wait, are you any good?”

“She's the best I've ever heard,” Fenris replies from behind me.

“I don't suppose you have a lute I can borrow?” I ask. “I wasn't exactly prepared for this.”

“I'm sure we can scrounge something up.”

We're shown to a room, and I change out of my leathers into a dress. It's a simple one, but then, Norah the Barmaid hadn't had any use for fancy things. I'd only brought along a couple changes of clothing for the trip, trying to pack light.

The innkeep does, in fact, come up with a decent lute. I tune it a bit, and nod my satisfaction with it.

“I didn't know you played,” Fenris comments.

“A necessary part of my bard training,” I explain. “Well, time to go earn my keep.”

I take the stage. The innkeeper hadn't been lying. There isn't an empty seat in the house. It's evident that there has been a lot of drinking already going on this evening. But, thinking about it, it isn’t that different really than the Hanged Man on a busy night. There is a lone stool on a small platform set up.

The innkeeper makes the introduction, explaining that there's been a change in the evening's entertainment, but that they won't be disappointed. *Hopefully I can make good on that.* My fingers strum the strings on the lute. The group doesn't quiet down at first, voicing their disapproval in the change in performer, but then I start to sing.

I choose a Fereldan ballad for my first song. It doesn't take long until the room is quiet. It was a good choice, and I can see many faces showing a hint of emotion. *I'd read the crowd correctly then. Plenty of refugees have made their way here.* My voice rings out, low, but clear. I have their
attention.

The next song is an Elven song of celebration. It's far more lively, and the crowd enjoys the upbeat tempo. I play a few more songs over the evening, including a rather ribald one about a sailor and a tavern wench. That gets a lot of laughs from the crowd. They're singing along by the end of it.

Finally, I stand, and take a small bow. The crowd asks for another song.

“Let me get something to eat first, I'm starving!” I shout, and they laugh. I join Fenris at his table in the back. The innkeep is quick to bring over a plate of food and a mug of ale.

“Andraste bless you, girl! I had no idea you'd get them on their feet like that at the end. I'm sorry the two of you won't be sticking around, but I'll have the missus pack you up a few meals worth of food for the road, for your trouble.” I smile at him, looking at the steaming plate in front of me.

“This looks fantastic, thank you,” I tell him. He nods, and backs off.

“That was truly something to be seen,” says Fenris with a grin. “You handled the crowd just right.”


“Yes, I suppose a room full of drunks is just another day to a barmaid.”

“Former barmaid. I quit yesterday,” I inform him.

I eat quickly, and I'm pulled up on stage for one last number. “Now this is the last one, I hope you enjoy it.” I tell them. There are a few sounds of disappointment, but they all quiet down when I start. I sing the lullaby that I sang to both Anders and Bartrand. I draw out the stanzas, putting a lot of emotion into it. I think of Anders, and wonder how he's doing back home. Home, is it still that?

Then what about Fenris and I? The song takes on a melancholy tone. A tear escapes my eye just as I finish. Looking up, I see a few watery eyes in the crowd, as well. Wiping my face, I stand, placing the lute next to the stool. I take one last bow, and the applause begins.

“I'm ready to get out of here,” I say to Fenris when I reach him a few minutes later. He doesn't say anything, but stands up next to me. The innkeeper hands us our payment and a small bundle of various cheeses, breads, and dried fruits. I thank them again, and we head to our room for the night.

When the door closes, Fenris gathers me in his arms.

“Let it out, Norah. I can guess what was in your mind during that last song. It's the first time I've seen you cry about it. You don’t have to be strong right now.”

I give a small sob and bury my face in his shoulder. It doesn't last long. After a couple of minutes, my tears are spent. I wipe my face, but I can't look up. “Sorry,” I say, feeling embarrassment creep into my cheeks.

Fenris slides his fingers along my jawline, and cups the side of my face, turning it up to look at him. “Norah, I knew exactly what I was getting into when I came with you. Let's just go to bed.” He takes off his armor, as before. I watch for a minute. His undershirt rides up as he takes off the breastplate, and I see the climbing vines of the tattoos on his back, going down into his trousers. I look away, my face hot.

I remove my boots. We're not sleeping outside tonight, and it would be more comfortable if I wasn't wearing this dress, but I decide against removing it. I turn, and Fenris is already relaxing against the pillows, one knee propped up. He opens his arms, and I go to him willingly. Snuggled in my now
familiar place under his arm, I run a hand over his stomach. He inhales a quick breath, but doesn't stop me.

“Can I ask about them?” I ask.

“It doesn't look like asking is what you want to do, but my answer is yes to both.”

I raise the edge of his undershirt, and trace the lines on his side. “Do they hurt?”

“Some, but it's mostly in memory,” he answers.

“Should I stop?” I ask, pausing my hand.

“No. Your touch may be my undoing, but I don't want to you to stop,” he states. I look up from his skin to meet his eyes.


“Will you kiss me?” I ask, my voice hesitant.

Fenris rolls over until he's on top of me, one knee between my thighs. “Are you sure, then?”

“About kissing? Definitely,” I nod, my heart beating a staccato rhythm in my chest.

He lowers his head to mine, and his lips brush my own with the barest of caresses. A slightly deeper pressure follows, but the kisses are light, teasing. His tongue flicks out and enters my parted lips. He's really good at that.

I arch up to capture his lips in a firmer kiss and I'm delighted when I hear him groan. He kisses me harder, pressing me down into the bed. Pulling back, he gives me a pleased look, his green eyes bright with desire.

He leans back in and plants kisses on my neck, trailing his way down to my shoulder. I gasp, and push him away. “Hey, I said kissing.”

“Yes, but you never said where I was allowed to kiss you,” he replies, chuckling.

He moves away, though, pulling me back to lean on his chest as we had been before. “But you're right. It would be hard to stop if we took it any further. This is enough, for now.”

My hand rests again on the shining lines of his tattoos. I can't help but touch them. “I'm sorry they hurt, but they are beautiful.”

“They're a disgusting reminder of what I used to be. A mark of slavery.”

“Those are important words, 'used to be'. What was it you told me a bit ago? That it was okay to not be strong? But hope is an elusive thing, I suppose.”

“That's funny to hear, coming from you.”

“Why, because of my revenge plotting?” I ask, chuckling.

“No, because of the reason you asked me to kiss you just now. Or did you think I wouldn't know?”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, suddenly confused. I just wanted to kiss him, right?
“You did it because you don't think there's a chance you'll make it back to him.”

His words are like ice water. *Had that been what I was thinking?* I sit up, pulling away from him, and move my legs over the edge of the bed.

“I think need some air.”
Flirting with Danger

Chapter Summary

Norah's snap decisions get her in quite the pickle.

Chapter 44: Flirting with Danger

Moving across the room, I retrieve my boots and pull them on. I can't look at Fenris, my mind is so fuddled at the moment. I need to get out of here, clear my head. I walk out the door without looking once at him. I want to know what his expression is, but at the same time, I don't think I can bear to see it.

The bar is quieter, but there are still some patrons there. I skirt around the back edge of the room, and make it to the door. Stepping outside, the cool air hits me. It's colder than last night had been. Maybe it's just our proximity to the mountains, and cold air coming down from the peaks. I shiver, rubbing my arms. I should have brought my cloak.

I think about what Fenris said. I had been thinking about Anders during the song. Living together in Lowtown with him and Cat was as much of home and family as I'd ever had. I feel the tears start anew, but swallow it down for now. I really do miss them.

But then, what do I feel for Fenris? I am attracted to him, sure, and he'd been more of a friend to me that I could have hoped for. My life wouldn't be the same if I'd never met him. Was it true then, that the only reason I wanted him to kiss me was because I've given up hope on making it back Anders? I want to rant and protest that of course it isn't true, but honestly, I'm not sure.

I need to stop sleeping next to Fenris until I sort out my feelings. Having made up my mind, I turn to head back into the inn, but a man blocks my path. I recognize him from the bar, when I had been on stage.

"I loved your act tonight," he says. "Do you perform anywhere else around here?"

"No, this was kind of a one time deal for me."

"That's too bad, I was hoping we could hear you sing again." We? I feel a sharp stab of pain in my head and see stars before it all goes black.

I come to with a jolt. I realize very quickly that I'm in the back of a wagon, and it had just hit a large rut in the road. I close my eyes again, not wanting to give away the fact that I am conscious again. My head throbs with pain, and my ears are ringing a little. My hands are together in front of me, tied with something itchy, probably rope.

How could I have been so stupid? I didn't even take my daggers with me when I went outside. In the lull of the last day or so, I'd forgotten the threat that Colette posed. I'd been on watch for templars, but these men had been wearing regular clothing. I'd been so distracted by my emotions that I hadn't
even noticed something was off until it was too late.

I take stock on my available resources. I'm awake, and they don't know it yet, so I have an element of surprise. My hands are in front of me, so I can use them to bash my kidnappers or use any objects I can find. And, I'm a mage. I'm never totally disarmed.

I risk cracking my eyes open a little. I am laying in the very back of a covered wagon. It is stacked high with other goods, but I can make out two men in the back with me, and I assume at least one more up front, driving the horses or mules.

“I can't believe it was that easy,” the man nearest me says. “She just came right out, sweet as can be.” This is the man who had talked to me outside, I recognize his voice.

_Give me a weapon and I'll show you sweet, you piece of shit._

“We got lucky,” says the other man, with a thick Orlesian accent. “You saw the look of her elf friend. That one is used to battle.”

“Yeah,” says the first man. “Pretty thing like her, and she's rutting with a knife-ear. Filthy whore, such a waste.”

_Thank the Maker, they didn’t hurt Fenris._

“Just remember, she's to be delivered unharmed,” says the Orlesian. “We don't get paid otherwise.”

_So I'm not to be hurt. Good, but hopefully the Fereldan with the dirty mouth can follow orders._ I can see no advantage in alerting them to my awakened state at this point, so I continue to play unconscious. I start counting, trying to calculate the distance we've traveled, but I give up after a few minutes, realizing I have no idea how long I was out.

Fenris might not have even noticed I'm gone yet. How would he know where to look for me? The whole process couldn't have taken longer than a few minutes. _Would he even think to look for me?_ I was upset when I walked out, maybe he just assumes I left without him. No, I left all of my belongings, including my staff and my daggers. _He has to know I wouldn’t just leave without saying something, right?_ Either way, I can't count on a rescue this time; I'm going to have to find a way out of this myself. I guess there is one silver lining in this shit storm: the Orlesian and his foul-mouthed friend are presumably taking me to my aunt. That means that this carriage is going straight for Val Royeaux. If I bide my time a while longer, I'll be that much closer to my objective once I get an opportunity to escape them.

The carriage doesn't stop for hours. I can't feel my fingers anymore from how my hands are tied. It's time to give up the ruse of sleeping. I groan, which isn't entirely staged, and move my head around.

“Where am I?” I ask, keeping my voice soft and feminine. They'd heard me speak with the Kirkwall accent, so I keep it. _Honestly, I'm so used to it now that it's second nature, and even I'm not sure if it's real or not._

“Don't you try nothin',” warns the Fereldan man. “Just play along nice and nobody has to get hurt.”

“O-Okay,” I say, forcing the stutter. “Can you help me sit up? I can't feel my hands or legs.”

Thankfully it's the Orlesian who comes to my aid. I don't relish the thought of the man who'd just called me a filthy whore touching me.
“Where are you taking me?” I ask.

“Back to your mother. She's been worried about you,” he explains. So it's “Mother” again, is it? Okay, I can play along.

“But you hit me,” I pout.

“My sincerest apologies, serah, but we believed it was necessary. Your mother said you ran away with unsavory types and refused to come home.”

“That's what she thinks?” I ask, feigning surprise at Colette's lie. Colette tells a lot of lies. “No, he was keeping me there. I didn't even know where I was. I'm grateful to you for coming to my rescue.” I hoped I wasn't laying in on too thick. I winced as my head hurt. That one was real. The Orlesian's eyes softened.

“I'm sorry if we were rough with you, serah. Had we known you would have come willingly, we wouldn't have resorted to such drastic measures.” I can't believe he's actually buying this. I should push it a bit further. I try to flex my fingers and am rewarded with stabs of pain. He takes my fingers in his own, and feels the temperature difference.

“You idiot, you tied the ropes too tight,” he barks at the Fereldan. Ok, maybe not the best idea to piss that guy off. He doesn't look very smart, but I'm guessing he didn't get hired for his brains. However, I'm surprised as the Orlesian unties the ropes completely.

“Oh, thank you!” I exclaim, rubbing my hands together.

The Fereldan speaks up, “You don't need to be getting ideas. No running away.”

“Into the forest? Alone? There are bears out there! Besides, you're taking me exactly where I want to go,” I say, using another half-truth.

* * *

The next few days are spent in a similar fashion—chatting with the Orlesian, placating Foul Mouth. I keep referring to them in my head that way. Neither one has given me a name to call them, which suits me just fine. I don't really want to know them. I actively try not to get on Foul Mouth's bad side, but see him glaring at me from time to time. I remember what he said about Fenris and I want to punch him. I manage to contain myself, but it's not easy.

The Orlesian doesn't seem like a bad person, really. I wonder how he got mixed up in this company. I flirt with him, but leave it vague enough so he questions whether or not it was really flirting. He really must think women really are stupid. He's easy to manipulate.

The third man, the driver, is gruff-looking, with an overgrown beard and too few teeth. He doesn't say much, just keeps to the driving, occasionally sipping from a small metal flask. When we make camp for the night, he even keeps his bedroll a ways away from the others.

* * *

Over time, my captors start to trust me more and more. It takes days and I don't once try to leave or fight them. I start helping with the cooking, something I have a bit of experience with from the Hanged Man.

I watch my kidnappers, however, and I notice some patterns to their behavior. They take turns standing watch. The driver always goes first, and has the shortest shift. He's asleep not long after
dark. The Orlesian usually has the second watch in the middle of the night, and finally the Fereldan in the latest part just before dawn. The Fereldan smokes a pipe, especially toward the end of his shift. I can smell him coming from wherever he is.

My best bet would be if I could manage to get them all to sleep at the same time. Although none of them have mentioned my magic, I assume they found me by using a phylactery. I haven't seen it yet, but that's probably why they've been so lenient in letting me have a little privacy when I need to relieve myself. I'll need to find it and get it away from them if I'm going to make good on my escape. I avoid using magic to heal myself, just in case they somehow don't know.

There has been no sign of Fenris. I've tried dropping a few markers here and there, a torn piece of my underskirt, a few good footprints. I doubt it's enough of a trail for him to follow. Hopefully, he figures out that it's my aunt's men who have me and continues on toward Val Royeaux. Meeting up there is likely our best option. That is, of course, assuming he’s still coming. Maybe it would be better if he turns back. He has Danarius to worry about, after all. He could go back to Kirkwall and finish things. At least he'd be out of the way of my aunt's men.

I see my chance when we're about a day from the city. I go down toward the river to wash up. I see the familiar twisting roots of a most useful plant. Deathroot, finally! I'd taken the job of cooking with the intent of poisoning them, but I hadn't found any herbs or such that I could use. This was a lucky find. Using a nearby rock, I scrape off a portion of the root into a torn piece of my underskirt. The garment is much shorter than when I started out, but there's enough fabric left to make a small pouch. I put the pouch up my sleeve for later.

Tonight's dinner is perfect. Soup. They shouldn't notice the extra flavor, and later, they will be very ill. Hopefully enough to knock them out, or at least distract them so I can find that damned phylactery. I stir the soup, tasting it as I go, and after I've raised the ladle to my lips to taste it, I pinch the fabric of the pouch and allow the Deathroot to fall into the liquid. I stir again. I give it a few minutes to make sure that it permeates the soup before calling it done.

“Soup's ready,” I call to them. They've been eating my cooking for a few days now, they don't hesitate to dig in. Thank goodness, I was worried Foul Mouth would notice something. I get myself a bowl, but only fill it halfway, so if they look, it will look like I've eaten some.

I glance at the others over my bowl. That's when I notice the driver. Shit, he's not eating. In fact, he's staring right at me. Why isn't he eating?

It doesn't take long after the meal for the poison to kick in. The other two start becoming ill, retching into the bushes. I fake illness, myself, to cover my involvement.

“Oh no,” I say innocently, wiping my mouth. “Those mushrooms must have been bad. I'm so sorry!”

The driver stands up and walks toward me. I back up, but I'm already at the edge of camp, and bump into something. He reaches out with a hand and manages to grab me around the throat. He starts squeezing and I can't breathe. “Don't hurt her,” the Orlesian attempts to protest, but is interrupted by being sick again. I need to do something. Don't panic. I know that the other two have weapons on them; the Orlesian carries a shortsword, and Foul Mouth has a pair of short knives. But they're hopelessly out of reach for me at the moment. There's only one weapon available to me.

I let the rage fill me. Magic rises, and I go to release a fireball...but nothing happens. What? I look at the driver, and he's grinning a sick smile at me. He’s a templar? Shit!

Finally, he throws me to the ground, and I'm racked with pain, not just from the fall, but he smites me as well, making my magic, my mana cost me. I cough and gasp through the pain, trying to get a
breath through my bruised throat. He kicks me in the stomach, still saying nothing, but his gesture is
enough. Magic won't help me here.

But, the Orlesian’s sword is closer now, because of where I fell. In a practiced move, I spin over to it,
grab the shortsword from where it sits, and leap to my feet, facing the templar. Now the flask he had
been drinking from makes sense. He was taking lyrium. I should have known. I breathe heavy and
attempt to keep my footing. I hate templars.

He grabs a long dagger from behind him, underneath a pack, and squares off. It shines in the
firelight, coated in something. Poison. I can't let that thing hit me. I steady my harried breathing as
best I can with my throat on fire, and focus only on him. The other two don't matter right now. All
that matters is staying out of the way of that blade and getting the kill. Sofie runs through my mind,
and I smile at the thought.

We dance, swinging quickly and ducking out of the way, circling each other. Surprisingly, the man
is well versed in close-handed combat with shorter blades. I thought templar training mostly involved
longer weapons like longswords. You always see them carrying bigger weapons and shields. This
man must have left the order some time ago - it would explain his disheveled appearance and
willingness to work for coin.

I need higher ground, some kind of advantage. I run past him and leap up on the wagon, climbing
through it quickly. I kick the crates inside toward him as a distraction, and I'm able to get to the other
side. Standing on the driver's seat, I see him tripping over the debris. Now's my chance. Jumping
down, I swing the shortsword in a wide arc, and slice him open along the midsection. My cut is
deep, and he puts a hand to his stomach to hold his innards in place. He’s hurt, but not down yet.

He takes another step toward me, one hand holding in his intestines while the other still holds the
poisoned blade. He swipes at me, and I lean to the side, avoiding the blow just in time. Anticipating
his move, I bring the shortsword down as I hard as I can on his forearm. It lodges in the bone, but it's
enough to make him drop the weapon. He yells, horrified at the pain. I pick up the poisoned dagger
quickly, ducking out of reach, and follow through with an upward thrust, ramming his own blade up
into his skull from underneath.

He starts to gurgle and foam from the mouth. His hand falls away from his ruined stomach, and slick
lumps of connected flesh tumble out. He falls over. The noises stop after a minute. The other two
look at me in astonishment.

“Nothing to say?” I say to both of them. “Then I'll talk, you listen. I'm walking out of here. You're
going to give me the vial from Lady Colette. You're going to go far away, and never seek me again.
If I find out you haven't followed my instructions, I'll come back for you, too.”

The Fereldan is the one to point to the driver's bag. I rummage through it quickly, glancing up from
time to time to make sure they aren't trying anything. They just look at me, terror in their eyes. These
are the men my aunt hired? The templar I get, but after Nikolaus and the five templars from before,
these guys seem rather incompetent.

I find the vial, and breath a sigh of relief. I smash the hated thing under my foot. I take the rest of the
bag with me, stuffing a few pieces of food in it before I go. I also take one of the horses. No sense in
walking the rest of the way. It's difficult, mounting a horse in my dress, and I end up with my skirts
bunched around my thighs. The lack of underskirts actually helps a little. I’m bruised, sore, and I
can’t even heal myself, but at least I’m free. I ride, taking the same road we’ve been following for
the last few days, hoping it will take me toward Val Royeaux.
A mile or two down the road I'm able to breathe again. I might be on my own, but at least I got away. I give a thought to Fenris. *If he followed me, where will he be?* If he's still on foot, he'll take a lot longer to get here than I did, despite the extra weight of the carriage. I don't know the best way to find him. And, for all I know, he could have headed back for Kirkwall already. I decide to just keep going.

I ride on until just before dark. The clouds above threaten rain. I don't have anything with me to build camp, so I hadn't bothered trying to stop before now. I see that the road crosses a small river. Underneath the bridge will at least give me some protection from the elements.

I dismount and lead the horse down the embankment, however I see I'm not the only one with that idea. There's a figure there standing over a tiny fire. *I should move on,* I think and move to turn the horse around, when a voice calls out.

“Norah?”

*Fenris.* By Andraste's Holy Ashes, I couldn't be happier to see anyone right now.

He strides to me in purposeful steps. I brace myself for the scolding I'm sure is coming, but it doesn't happen. He pulls me to him, wrapping his arms protectively around me in a fierce hug.

“That was all my fault. I wasn't thinking straight. I didn't even think to take my daggers when I left. I got careless.”

I wrap him back. “No, this was all my fault. I wasn't thinking straight. I didn't even think to take my daggers when I left. I got careless.”

He pulls back and looks at me. I see him take in the bruises on my neck, my rumpled clothing, and the dried blood that still coats my clothing. He frowns. “I can only imagine what you must have been through,” he says, smoothing my hair down.

“It was a little rough for a while, but I managed. I'm glad you're here. I was worried I wouldn't be
able to find you again.”

“Come, sit by the fire. It will keep out the cold a bit,” he says.

I tie the reins of the horse to a small tree near the edge of the bridge in a grassy area. I hope that it will be out of the sight of any travelers, not that many will be on the road at this time of day. My magic has returned, so I heal my bruises with a quick spell. I move to sit next to him, but far enough away to not be touching. He asks about what happened, and I fill him in on the three men and what had transpired. He seems thoughtful, saying nothing.

“I also thought about what you said,” I start.

“I never should have said that. I'm sorry, I was being unfair to you,” he says.

“No, you were right to say it,” I insist. “I had been acting impulsively, and hadn't taken the time to sort out my feelings on the matter. It's me who should be sorry.”

“Do you regret it, then?” he asks, his tone low and serious.

“Not regret, no. I'm more confused,” I explain. “When those men had me, it made me realize some things. If it hadn't been for Anders and Corff fighting them off, the templars in Kirkwall would have taken me to Colette already. Each time she's sent someone for me it's gotten worse. I had no idea what would be coming for me next, or what I would be facing when I came to Orlais. I still don't. I had to make a decision to leave him, but I didn't really want to,” I say, tears falling. “I didn't want to go.

“I told him not to wait for me, Fenris. I never expected to be able to go back; this was a one-way trip for me from the start. That's why I left Cat, why I wanted to go alone, and why I didn't tell anyone else. It was my turn to protect them. You weren't supposed to be here.”

“And about the kiss?” he asks, prompting me to say more.

“I think I just wanted to feel close to you. I like seeing you smile the way you do before you're fully awake in the mornings. Seeing that unguarded side of you makes me happy. Sleeping next to you feels good, too - safe, like you would be with me all the way to the end. I don't regret any of that.”

I continue, “But when you said that, it was like waking from a dream. I do care for you, but I'm honestly not sure what that means. The one thing I do know is that I need to go back to Kirkwall. I left things unfinished there. I've decided I will find a way to live through this and make it back...somehow.”

“I always knew about your feelings for him,” Fenris says. “I'm just enough of a fool to want you anyway.”

I look at him, meeting his gaze. “I'm sorry, I can't make you any promises. I'm not over Anders. I don't know if I'll ever be, and it wouldn't be fair to you to allow things to go further like this.”

He nods.

We sleep separately. It gets a little chilly, and I miss his warmth, but I remind myself that it's better this way. Thankfully, Fenris had brought some of my things with him, including my weapons and my cloak. I wrap the cloak more firmly around me. Still, it takes me a while to get to sleep.

* * *
I wake in the middle of the night, disoriented. I sit up. The fire has burned down to a few glowing embers, but otherwise it's dark. I can't see anything around that would have woken me. As quietly as I can, I get up. I leave my cloak, but grab my daggers and climb back up the embankment toward the underside of bridge itself, trying to get a better vantage. It's just so hard to see. There's a light rain falling, nothing too serious, but almost no moonlight makes it through the cloud cover, leaving the landscape in shades of black.

I sense movement to my left, and hear Fenris's soft whisper, “What is it?”

I can't shake the sensation that something is happening, but I see no other movement. I can't hear anything but the rain, a few soft whinnies from the horse, and my own breathing. Fenris reaches my location.

“Can you see anything?” I ask.

“No,” he says, but looks around, alert.

After a few minutes, nothing has happened and I start to feel a bit silly. “Sorry, I just had a bad feeling. I wish Cat were here; she would have figured that out in no time.”

“Your instincts are often correct, you are right to listen to them,” he adds, but goes back to his bedroll and sits back down.

I return to my own spot. I’m awake for a while again before drifting off. Immediately, I’m in the Fade. How long has it been since I’d been here? I think, looking around a the unusual landscape. This is a part of the Fade I have not visited in a long time. Maybe that means we’re close to Val Royeaux and Colette?

It doesn’t take long before a demon shows itself. A despair demon, of course. It must have sensed my emotions before.

“I don’t have time for this,” I tell it immediately. “I’m not interested in whatever you’re offering.”

“Are you certain?” it asks in a hissing wheezy voice. “Not even the location of your father?”

“I have ways of finding that out for myself. I’ll just beat it out of Lady Colette.”

“Then what about a way to save your mage lover?” it asks.

I pause. Is it possible that it knows a way to remove Justice from Anders? I’ve had no luck so far looking in other places. No, there’s no way that I can accept anything this thing has to offer. Anders wouldn’t want it this way.

It must have sensed my hesitation, because it follows up with, “You felt my power; I drew you here from the other side. You know I can give you what you want.”

“Demons don’t offer anything but lies and illusions. No deal.”

It screeches at my rejection, and I feel the air around me grow colder. Shit, I’m going to have to fight this thing.

This is far from my first foray into the Fade, and I know how things work here. I summon Nikolaus’s staff from where I had left it in Lowtown. It materializes, and I grip the staff tightly. I cast a quick glyph to give me a little boost to my defenses.
I take a wide stance and announce in a loud voice, “I’m not some untried child, spirit. Leave me be, and we need not come to conflict.”

“I know well what you are,” it hisses. “And I know what you’ve done. I know what you carried across the Veil.”

“I’m through talking.” I allow my anger to fill me, and this time I feel it surge wildly. Magic in the Fade feels different than in the physical realm. I absorb the energy around me and allow it to spool inside me, coiling like a rope. The despair demon starts to cast a spell of its own, but it will never get it off in time.

I know its nature already. It is cold, sloth, and sadness. My anger will burn all of it away. I unleash the fire spell and I’m blown back by the impact. Whoa, that was more than I intended. That wasn’t Fireball. I don’t even know what to call that. The demon wails again, and my ears ring from the resonance, but it dissipates, burning from the inside out.

I’m glad it’s gone, but I can’t stay here. That commotion will bring others. I need to wake up. I panic a little as I see them, a few at first, then dozens of demons, pouring toward me. I need to focus. Breathe. Inhale.

* * *

I awake to Fenris shaking me. My head is in his lap. I look up and see worry in his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Fenris?” I ask.

“You were moaning and wouldn’t wake up,” he says, and runs a hand through his hair. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“Demons. A despair demon, to be precise, and a pretty powerful one at that,” I say, sitting up. “It had me trapped in the Fade. I took care of it.”

“Demons...yes, mages attract demons,” he says, backing away from me.

“I didn’t take its offer, don’t worry,” I reassure him. “Nothing they offer could ever be worth the cost. Demons are just a fact of existence for us mages. I’ve been handling them my whole life; I’m not about to do something stupid now.”

“Every mage is susceptible; you are no different.”

“Fenris, what’s wrong?” I ask, and reach out to touch him. “You don’t normally say that kind of stuff to me.”

He recoils from me as if I had tried to burn him. “Alright, I won’t touch you if you don’t want, I promise. It’s just me, Norah.” I continue to sit near him, but don’t make any further moves toward him. I don’t know what to do.

Eventually, his eyes focus on me. He frowns at me, confused. Had he been lost in a memory?

“Are you alright?” I ask. “I tried to help you, like you did for me before, but you wouldn’t let me touch you.”

His frown deepens, and he turns away.

“Fenris...” I reach out for him again.

“Tell me what I can do then. Please.”

He turns back around, angry. He leans against me, pushing me backwards until I’m laying flat on my back again. His hands pin my wrists down on either side of my head and he looks down at me. His jaw clenches. “You’re everything I hate. Why do I want you so badly?”

His lips crash into mine. It hurts, but at the same time, a pulse of pleasure courses through me. His lips withdraw, and I feel his teeth scrape the column of my neck. I shiver.

“You’ve bewitched me somehow,” he insists.

*What? No, I have to stop him.* Letting go of one wrist, he pulls the neckline of my dress downward, and I feel a sting of pain on my shoulder from his teeth as he bites me. I cry out.

“No, Fenris, stop,” I say, but he doesn’t seem to hear me. “Not like this, don’t do this to yourself.”

*             *             *

I awake again with a start. Fenris is shaking me, as before. “Norah, are you alright?”

I back away from him quickly, but he doesn’t try to hold me down as he had in the dream. *The demon, of course. Illusion.* A confused look crosses his face.

“What just happened?” I ask him.

“You were tossing and turning, talking in your sleep again, only this time you wouldn't wake up. I didn't know what to do,” he says, sounding very much like he had earlier. He even followed by running his hand through his hair, mimicking what dream Fenris had done.

“It was a despair demon. Had me trapped in the Fade,” I hear myself saying very familiar words, as well. Similar, but different. “You said I was talking?”

He looks away, uncomfortable. “Yes,” he says. “You mostly kept calling my name. Do I want to know?”

“Probably not,” I say. “I hate going into the Fade for that reason. It's worse for those like me, the ones with a strong tie to spirit magic. The demons won't leave us alone when we're there. This one didn't like that I said no to its offer, so it pulled images of you out of my head and used them to mess with me.”

“That sounds...difficult. I admit I have not considered what it must be like for a mage. Perhaps we should reconsider the sleeping arrangements, after all,” he says. “Until we get back to Kirkwall, at least.”

“I first traveled to the Fade when I was ten. I've been handling demons my whole life, Fenris. They're annoying, but I can deal with it.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“I appreciate the offer, but I'd rather not give them any more material.”

That gets a chuckle out of him.
Dawn is a welcome sight after the night I've had. I'm exhausted, filthy, and shaken by my encounter with the demon. Well, I can do something about one out of three, I tell myself, and go to wash. Fenris is still sleeping. I head a bit further down the stream for some privacy should he awaken and come looking for me. A small cove with bushes for cover looks perfect.

I strip down to my chemise and start to wash some of the blood and dirt off of me. I remember the demon's depiction of Fenris, and find myself scrubbing my skin a little harder than I should. He'd been so angry. Fenris hadn't trusted me at first, but once we'd gotten to know each other, he had shown me only kindness. I should have recognized something was off earlier. I'd thought he was having a trauma episode like mine when he'd shut down.

I'm surprised that the demon chose Fenris, and not Anders to torment me with. With what it offered, it was already aware of my rekindled hope of going home. It would have made for an effective target. Maybe it understood my feelings for Fenris are more complicated. The despair demon had manipulated my desire to help Fenris, instead, and had twisted it so that I couldn't reach him.

I recalled its statement about knowing what I brought from the Fade. It was talking about how Cat and I got out, of course, but how did it know? The thought of Cat makes me miss her presence even more. I'm starting to regret leaving her home, but if I can't be there for Anders, I'm happy that he has Cat. Now that I've decided to go home, I feel a sense of urgency.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Norah. You still need to neutralize Colette before you can ever have a future. I sigh. My childhood was a mess of lies, secrets, abuse and harsh lessons it feels like I'll never escape. Cat is the one good thing that came of any of it. Lady Colette has the answers I want about my father, but I doubt she'll ever tell the truth about anything. Either way, I will find every last phylactery she had made and see to it personally that she never gets a chance to hurt me or my friends again.

I rinse and dry my hair as best I can, humming a little to myself. Ok, maybe one other good thing came of my childhood. I really do love music. Not even what I was made to do with it could dampen my enjoyment of it.

I dress in my leathers, thankfully brought along by Fenris. The dress I had been wearing is hopeless. I tear a few useful strips from it, and bury the rest near one of the bushes, abandoning it. It's still a little chilly, even in this part of the country, and having wet hair is not helping. I plait my damp tresses to keep them off of me, and tie off the braid with one of the strips from the ruined dress. I'm just pulling my cloak back on when I hear someone approach. Fenris calls my name softly.


“I followed your singing,” he says with a grin. “You look better.”

“I feel a bit better, more like my myself than I have in a while. I'm just ready to see this done. If I'm right about where we are, we should reach the city today. Wait, how did you get here so fast?”

“Same way you did: I stole a horse. I let it loose it once I reached this place. I assumed you would be traveling this way, and I might be able to find you in passing.”
“Oh, there is one thing I need to do in Val Royeaux before we head to Colette's estate.”

* * *

The Grand Cathedral is more impressive than I remember. I feel small in comparison to its massive size. It's comforting, in a way. Despite my unconventional upbringing, I'd been brought up with faith, and the cool stone walls of the Chantry are familiar. I'd only been to the Grand Cathedral itself a few times when I was a bit older, but despite being the home of the Divine, it feels much the same as the smaller village Chantry.

I pull my cloak close around my neck. Fenris looks uncomfortable.

“I will meet you at the gate when you have finished your business,” he says.

Can't say I blame him - he does kind of stand out in a crowd. But I have to do this. I'm not sure how I am going to convince anyone to help me, but I need to find out if the Chantry has knowledge of spirits and how to separate them from a host. I know a little of the layout of the place from when I was here before, but I don't know where to start looking. There's probably a library, but that has to be so massive I could browse for weeks and not find what I'm looking for. The scholars here spend their whole lives studying the Chant and related works.

I'm going to need to find an expert. First I decide to head into the large room where the congregation gathers to hear the Chant. I kneel and recite a few words myself. No harm in honoring tradition, and asking for a blessing.

I stand and attempt to leave the way I came in, but I'm stopped by guards.

“Her Most Holy, The Divine will be heading this way. You may pass after she is finished.”

I've never seen Divine Justinia. From what I've heard of her, she is kind, but maybe a bit unorthodox in her methods. That sounds like my kind of leader. A procession starts. It's small, but grand, with rows of sisters in their sunburst robes. It's hard to see past the guards, and they're some distance away, but I'm impressed. The Divine herself is dressed in glowing white. She is chatting with the sister next to her. Wait, I know that woman. I rack my brain, trying to remember where I know her from. She's not from Kirkwall, I'm sure of that. Which means I had to have known her from my time in Orlais. But, I hadn't had many experiences with Chantry sisters.

Then it hits me. I know her from the Game . She looks over at me and makes a gesture. Two guards grab one of my arms each. “You'll be coming with us,” they order. What have I gotten myself into now?

I'm escorted to a small office and pushed down into a chair. I watch them as they back away, but remain standing just within arm’s reach of the chair. The woman from before enters, and sits down on the other side of the desk.

“Hello Leliana,” I greet her.

“Norah. I did not expect to find you here.”

“Nor I you. Since when do assassins join the Chantry?” I ask, in no mood to hedge words with her. I had other things to do that were more pressing.

“I'm the Left Hand of the Divine, now. I handle threats to the Sunburst throne,” she explains.

“Ah, so that's what you're worried about. No one sent me,” I respond. “I've been out of the Game for
years now. In fact, I've made my home in Kirkwall. I'm here on personal business. I could use your help, actually."

“You're certainly not playing the Game anymore, talking like that,” she says, somewhat condescendingly. “Kirkwall, you say? Perhaps we can aid each other, yes? Tell me, what 'personal business' brought you to the Grand Cathedral?”

“I need to talk to an expert on spirits and possession.”

“You speaking of possession is not reassuring. I've been asked by Divine Justinia to investigate the unrest with the mages in Kirkwall.”

“I told you, I'm not in the Game anymore, but I do know a lot about the situation in Kirkwall. If you want to know what I know, Leliana, you can just ask.”

“You've changed, Norah.”

“I know,” I agree, smiling.

Leliana gives a small exhalation of amusement and shakes her head.

“So will you help me?” I ask.

“If you answer my questions about Kirkwall, I'll see what I can do. What is it you seek, specifically?”

“I need to know how to unbind a spirit from its host.”

“Hm, I remember the Hero of Ferelden accomplished something of the sort.”

“Really?” I ask.

“But I don’t her method would work. It was a unique situation. The demon was still in the Fade, and had not yet crossed over.”

I slump in disappointment.

“I do have a friend, a Senior Enchanter. She's one of the kindest people I've ever met, and knows more about the Maker’s first children than anyone I know. She may know more about what you're looking for, yes? If your information is good, then I will ask her.”

I spend the next several minutes answering Leliana's questions about Kirkwall. I leave out Anders, of course, but share most of everything else I know, including Kirkwall's new Champion, Hawke.

When I am finished, she looks at me. “I'll be leaving for Kirkwall myself in a few days. I should have your answer by then.”

“Then I'll be back. Thanks, Leliana,” I say, smiling again. Pausing at the door, I add, “I'm not the only one who's changed.”

The guards show me to the exit, without touching me this time. I walk out the door into the plaza. The curved arches and statuary don't catch much of my attention this time. I'm elated. I may have an answer for Anders in a couple of days...provided I survive my confrontation with my aunt.
Chapter Summary

Norah and Fenris reach Colette's estate

Chapter 47: Family Secrets

I've never felt much affiliation for House Tromperie. The only other surviving member of the house that I have met is Colette, but the estate has been in the family for generations. The name served me well in the Game, but I've always secretly felt disgust for people who trusted someone based on a bloodline.

Fenris and I mount back up and ride toward Lady Colette's estate. Riding double on my stolen horse, it's impossible for our bodies not to touch. He sits behind me, one arm around my midsection. I handle the reins. It's strange, being this close to him again. I've missed his familiar warmth and scent, but I try ignore the fluttering feeling in my chest. I can't afford to be distracted right now.

The ride takes a while, and it's getting dark by the time we reach the outskirts of the estate. I tether the horse again out of sight of the path, and give it some water. I leave the tether loose enough that the horse can pull itself free with enough effort. I don't want to trap it here if I don't come back. There is enough grass in the area that it should be content to graze for a bit. I remind myself to get it a treat when I have the opportunity. “Thank you for carrying us this far,” I say to it, petting its muzzle.

We cross through a forested area, and emerge into the vineyard. The rows of trellises once housed some of the finest grapes in all of Orlais. Now, however, they show a serious lack of tending, the vines overgrown, and some falling down onto the ground where they have withered and spoiled. The wood of the trellises themselves is broken in several spots.

“What happened here? This vineyard used to be thriving,” I say out loud to Fenris.

He just shakes his head.

“We're getting close. Be on the lookout for my aunt's guards,” I tell him.

We are vigilant, stepping forward slowly, looking for any signs of movement in the encroaching darkness, but see none. There should be men walking the perimeters, guarding the gates, but there aren't. We make it easily up to the manor house before we spot a living soul. The uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach grows.

Two men guard the main door. I motion for Fenris to follow me the other direction. We encounter no further resistance as we head around the back of the house. I lean in to whisper to him, “Something’s not right here; there should be a lot more guards than this.” He nods in agreement.

I examine the back of the house. No guards here, either. Many windows face this direction, all dark, save one on the third story. I walk closer to the lighted window. There is lattice work under the window. This used to be covered with flowers, but it too has been left to the elements, the vines both overgrown and dead in sections. I test the lattice and it appears strong enough to hold my weight.
Fenris frowns at me and shakes his head, indicating we should go in another way. I shake my head back and start climbing. There is a gentle creaking noise as I climb, but I doubt it's loud enough for anyone to hear.

I pause close to the top and listen. There are voices, but I can't make out what they're saying. Whoever is speaking isn't in the room with the window. I peer over the ledge carefully, but find the room inside to be empty. I slip inside and go into the room. *Whoa, the room is totally empty, of furniture, paintings, everything.* The light is coming from the next room. I lean over the window ledge and gesture to Fenris that it's safe to come up. Without waiting for him, I sneak over to the doorway, trying to hear the voices better. *Cat would have made this part so much easier.* I see Fenris enter. I didn't even heard him climbing up. He's still frowning at me. I stick out my tongue at him and he grins.

Pointing at the door, and then my ear, I give the signal for him to listen too.

I hear Colette's lilting voice say, “...don't have the money yet - I told you, I'll get it to you as soon as I--”

She's cut off by a male voice, “We've been patient, your ladyship, even when everyone else left. Pay us, or we are leaving too.”

I can imagine her scowl as she yells, “Fine, leave! I don't need you anyway.”

“Maker have mercy on you, your ladyship,” the male says, and I hear the sound of a door closing. *Colette's having money problems? Since when? She just sent those men at the tavern after me the other day...though, come to think of it, they weren't as capable as the templars had been.*

I give up on sneaking and walk into the next room. Colette is seated at a small desk. There is not much else in the room, like the one beside. Colette herself looks much as she did the last time I saw her. Perhaps a hint of a wrinkle around her eyes, but otherwise she doesn't appear to have aged at all. Her dark hair is worn up off her head in Orlesian style, and she's wearing an ornate dress that would have been fit for the palace. Her eyes widen when she sees me, but then settle into a neutral expression.

“Norah. I assumed when that batch of ruffians didn't check back in that I would be hearing from you soon,” she says, her pretty mouth turned downward in a frown. The way her Orlesian accent puts equal stress on both syllables of my name sparks about a million memories. I struggle to stay focused.

Fenris steps out of the shadows into the room, and Colette stands up, hurriedly putting the chair in front of her in a protective motion. I thought I would be glad to see her fear, but something’s off about this. She seems more sad than anything.

“Why have you been sending people after me?” I ask bluntly.

Her brow wrinkles. “It was not *my* idea. I'm happy to be rid of you - you and that thing you keep as a pet.”

“You expect me to believe someone else put you up to it?” I question, incredulous.

“It was that detestable pirate. Nikolaus's so-called friend. I wish I'd never laid eyes on the man,” she says, almost pouting.

“She's working with Talon?” Fenris says, instantly more cautious, but he calms when no soldiers or boogeymen appear.
“What would Talon possibly want with me?” I ask.

“How should I know?” she says, throwing her delicate hands in the air. “He just made me keep sending people after you, made me hire people all over to watch for you. It cost me everything, but he wouldn't let me stop. You would have thought your father would have been enough for him.”

“What was that about my father?” I ask, leaning in. “You should choose your next words very carefully.” I draw my daggers, and I see her wince. It may have been a while, but she remembers what I'm capable of with my blades.

“That pirate is a horrible man,” she says. “I only used him at all because Nikolaus said I should trust him. He was meant to steal something for me, a precious gem that would have made me the envy of all Val Royeaux. Not only did the beast keep it, but he threatened me, and brought his disgusting men to my doorstep. I later discovered your father was working for him. His offer through Nikolaus to steal for me was no coincidence at all.”

“Ser Aron is working for Talon. Did I hear you correctly?”

She nods, and continues, “He must have told this Talon about our family, and I’m sure Nikolaus told him about about you and your pet.”

“Cat is not my pet, she's my friend,” I say, getting defensive.

“Yes, yes, Norah, but it is why he was so interested,” she says rolling her eyes and waving a hand dismissively in my direction. “He wants you, for some reason. I told him you are more trouble than you are worth and he should just kill you, but he wants you alive. He would not leave me be until I spent more and more of my money trying to bring you back. I would have stopped a long time ago if it were not for him and his threats.”

I can't help but feel a little sorry for her. Of course, she did just admit she would have had me murdered, but as I came here to do the same thing, I suppose I can overlook that.

“Where is my father now?” I ask.

“How should I know? All I know is he works for that horrible man, and I for one, will be happy to never see him again.”

“Is that why the estate looks the way it does? There were no guards on the outskirts, the grapes left to spoil.” She nods again. “I sent our people first, then more and more.”

I sigh. “Just give me the phylacteries and let's be done with this, Colette. I came here willing to kill you to make it stop, but I doubt you even have the resources to send another team at this point. The last one wasn't very good.” I say, rubbing my neck a little in the process. Well, that silent templar sure had been scary enough, but the others were mild in comparison.

“And what of me? What am I supposed to do when his men return?” she asks.

“Not my concern, but I hear Nevarra is lovely this time of year,” I say, bending down to look her in the eye. “If I have to return here again, I'll do worse to you than Talon will,” I promise, a cold edge to my voice.

She opens a drawer and pulls out a small wooden box. Opening the lid, she reveals two vials.

“This is it? I promise you Colette, I'm good at finding people.”
“That’s it. I...think I would like to travel a bit,” she says, looking downward.

I immediately smash both vials under my boot. Seeing the blood seeping into the ancient rug gives me a sick sense of joy.

“And Ser Aron?”

“How would I know? Probably with Talon, wherever he is. He sends his men to harass me.”

“If you’re smart at all, dear Aunt Colette, you’ll make sure I never see your face again,” I say. I turn to Fenris. “We’re done here.”

We walk down the stairs and straight out the front door. The guards are gone. Evidently that's who she had been arguing with about money before.

“Well,” I say as we exit, “that didn't go at all the way I expected.”

“Are you satisfied with this?” Fenris asks, confusion in his voice.

“No. I wanted to come here and feel justified in ending her. Now I just feel pity. It's a bit of a let down after the build up.”

“I know what you mean,” he says. “Then we're ready to head back to Kirkwall?”

“I need to go back to Val Royeaux again first. An old friend has some information for me.”
Chapter Summary

Norah and Fenris have one last night in Val Royeaux.

Chapter Notes

Mild NSFW

IMPORTANT: Read the author note at the end of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 48: One Last Night

We stop for the night where I had tethered the horse. It had pulled itself loose while we were gone, but is still wandering nearby and comes when I call it. I tie the reins again, more securely this time, and we make camp nearby. After everything that has happened, I sleep deeply with no nightmares, and no trips to the Fade. I wake up feeling rested, despite another night spent on the ground. It isn't long before we are on the road again.

The trip back to Val Royeaux seems to take less time this time, but I'm finding it harder to ignore Fenris's body behind mine with no Colette anymore to think about. It might be my imagination, but he seems to be holding me a little closer. My heart races at the contact of his thighs to the back of mine, his chest to my back. I try to focus on guiding the horse, and keep my face forward to hide my flushed cheeks. I hope he can't feel my heartbeat through my thick cloak.

At last we dismount, and I feel much more confident walking back into the Grand Cathedral. Fenris stays outside with the horse again. I announce to the guards that I am expected, and give my name. It's only a moment before they guide me back to Leliana's office.

She looks annoyed, pacing behind her desk. She looks at me and says, “I said a few days, not one. You're early, Norah.”

“Sorry, I've just finished my other business here and I need to get back to Kirkwall quickly. You haven't had time to talk with the Senior Enchanter you spoke of?”

“Not yet, but she's in town. I'll be meeting with her later today, but my ship is leaving for Kirkwall in the morning. Since we seem to be traveling in the same direction, why don't you join us and I can tell tell you what my friend has to say on the way? It would be pleasant to have some company for the journey, no?”

“You left out, 'and I have more questions about Kirkwall',” I add, smiling.

“Ah. Yes, I will admit, more information about the situation would be helpful,” she replies, choosing
her words carefully.

“I have a friend who is traveling with me, an elf. So long as he's welcome, I'll tell you what I can,” I agree. A ship will get us home much faster.

“Meet us at the pier in the morning; we'll depart just after dawn,” she orders concisely, and goes back to looking papers on her desk. Clearly, I've been dismissed. I exit the room, and I'm again escorted out to the public area.

I'm going home. Not only that, I'll be there much sooner than I thought. Anders's face crosses through my mind. I can't wait to see him again, but how will he react? I did tell him not to wait for me. His situation is dangerous, as well. I hope he's okay. I send a silent hope that Hawke isn't getting him into too much trouble.

Fenris is waiting in the same spot when I leave the large plaza in front of the Grand Cathedral. He pushes away from the wall he had been leaning against, and says, “You have what you needed, then?”

“No, not yet, but I got us something even better. I got us passage on a ship home,” I tell him. “We leave first thing tomorrow.”

He just shakes his head. “A far different place than we were a few days ago.”

“Very. Now, we need to do something about this horse,” I tell him.

I buy an apple from a vendor not far away, and we get directions to a local stable that may want to purchase our horse. I cut up the apple and feed a few slices to the horse as we walk there. After meeting the stablemaster, I'm convinced that our equine friend has found a good home. The money from the sale gives us a little freedom to do something this afternoon.

“Anything you want to do before we leave Val Royeaux?” I ask.

“Not really,” he answers, and I can tell that he still feels uncomfortable here. Val Royeaux does take some getting used to. The streets are all clean and straight, the buildings grand and opulent. The goods are expensive, and the people well-dressed. The two of us stand out worse here than we ever did in Hightown.

“How about we just find a nice place to spend the night and get a meal? No reason to sleep outside tonight when we have the means to be comfortable.”

He nods. He's been quieter than usual. Now that I think about it, he didn't say much on the trip back here.

We find a small inn. Nothing too fancy; this looks more like somewhere the servants would go to blow off steam. I hope that it helps put Fenris more at ease, to be away from the wealthier portions of town. We sit down together and order a meal. It too, is nothing fancy, but fits the bill. He's still quiet as we eat. Something's going on with him.

After dinner, we retire to the room we rented for the night. Two beds this time, making that decision easy. I set down my things, remove my boots, and sit down at the edge of my bed. When I turn to Fenris, I find him looking at me.

“Something's obviously on your mind, Fenris. I've never known you to hold back your words.”

“I did not wish to dampen your enthusiasm, but it does occur to me that your situation has not
“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You have merely switched enemies. Your aunt may no longer have teeth, but Talon still does,” he says, looking at me. “You said you left to protect them, but the danger is still there.”

“Oh. I hadn't thought about it that way,” I admit, and sigh. “I guess with Isabela's involvement, I was seeing Talon as a collective problem, not just my own...but you're right. I doubt he'd hesitate to target my friends. Why didn't I think about that?”

“I can guess why,” he says sullenly.

“I still think we need to go back,” I assert. “They need to be warned, at least. Besides, my friend who's taking us there still has information I need, and you need to find Danarius. I meant what I said about helping you.”

He hesitates. “What if we don't go back?”

I look away. “I...” I trail off. I don't know what to say. He'd be willing to give up on revenge against Danarius? I think of the faces of everyone I'd be leaving behind, and my heart hurts. “I appreciate that you would even consider it, but I don't think I could do that.”

He nods. “Then if this is to be my last night alone with you, will you at least sleep next to me again, and let me hold you one last time?”

“Why are you talking like we're not going to see each other again?” I ask, confused.

“I hope I'm wrong, but helping you go back to Kirkwall feels like sending you back to him,” he says quietly. “I'm not ready to let you go yet.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me toward him with a gentle pressure. I may regret it later, but I let him. I know my heart's been conflicted, but I can't lie to myself and say I don't want to feel his touch again, just this one last time. So much for a room with two beds.

I help him remove his armor. It's heavier than I expected, and I give a small laugh as I struggle with it before setting it down. He reaches for the ties on my leathers. At first I put a hand on his to stop him, but decide to allow him to help. He loosens the ties, removing one piece at a time. First my bracers, then greaves, pausing after each one to stroke the flesh underneath.

“Turn around for a minute while I change out of the rest of my armor,” I say. He complies. I finish removing the remaining pieces, and free my hair from its braid. I slip my chemise back over my head and walk toward where he is seated on the bed. He reaches for the ties on my leathers. At first I put a hand on his to stop him, but decide to allow him to help. He loosens the ties, removing one piece at a time. First my bracers, then greaves, pausing after each one to stroke the flesh underneath.

Sliding backwards over the sheets, he makes a little room for me, but doesn't go completely to the other side. He wants me close. I sit on the side of the bed, and turn into him as I lay down. Firmly snuggled against his chest, I can feel his heart beating as fast as mine.

“I missed the way you fit in my arms,” he whispers. His free arm moves and I feel his hand stroking my hair, then sliding over my shoulder, and down my back. A tiny gasp escapes me at the unexpected sensation. He trails his fingers lightly over my skin through the fabric. I close my eyes and allow myself to enjoy the feeling of it.
“Being near you and not being able to touch you has been torture,” he murmurs.

I move my hand from on top of his chest around to his far side. I tilt my face upwards, from his shoulder to closer to his neck. “Mn, Fenris,” I murmur.

He moves, rising up, causing me to back away from him. He turns toward me and props himself up with one arm. His other hand slides underneath my head and into my hair, and gazes into my eyes.

“Whatever you choose, I’ll never forget the way you look in this moment. Thank you for tonight,” he says, and leans in to plant a soft kiss on my lips. “I...I love you, Norah.”

My heart hammers in my chest, and feels as though it may be breaking, but I can't bring myself to say the words back. He smiles wistfully. “I can wait for you.” With that, we settle back in next to each other.

I listen to his breathing, waiting to hear the familiar rhythm that would indicate he was sleeping, but he remains awake, the same as I.

*I hadn't said the words...but did I want to? Shit, am I in love with Fenris?* Before Anders, I hadn’t even known was love was. My aunt certainly never showed me any, and Nikolaus had only showed me the ugliest form possible. Sophie had cared, but she’d left me. I thought everyone would always leave me. That’s what I told Cat in the Fade, after all. *I'm going back because I have to, but what do I really want?*

Our arms wrapped around each other, neither Fenris nor I sleep the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter before the story will split into 2 different routes. The canon route will post first, beginning with chapter 49. It will be pretty clear by then end of 49 who Norah has chosen. If you think she has made the wrong choice, STOP READING. The "alternate route" will be posted once the canon route has completed. Unfortunately, as there is a sequel in the works, only one storyline can be canon. But, I was shipping both sides so hard at this point myself that I wrote both to help me decide. After working on both with my beta, I've decided to post the alternate route, as well.
Chapter Notes

This is the chapter where the story deviates. If at the end of the chapter, you think Norah should have chosen someone else, you can stop. There will be an "alternate route". However, this is the canon story line that will continue into the sequel.

Chapter 49: The Journey Home

As predicted, Fenris and I are given separate cabins on the ship and we don't see much of each other during the voyage. I guess the Chantry probably wouldn't approve of our sleeping arrangements prior to leaving. Which is funny when you think about it - Andraste had been already been married to a mortal man when the Maker took her as his bride. It always sounded a little sordid to me for an organization that asks their templars and sisters to take a vow of chastity.

I finally get my chance to talk to Leliana. She tells me of her friend, although she does not name her. Once I realize she is the same Leliana who traveled with the Hero of Ferelden, along with the others who helped her stop the Blight, I can probably can guess which mage she's talking about, but I might be wrong.

The information she provides is mostly the same as I've already learned. The most practiced method of dealing with an abomination is to kill the host. There is some belief that being made Tranquil can push the spirit into leaving, although neither of them have personally witnessed it working. She does give me one bit of useful information, however.

"The Avvar have a different relationship with spirits. I remember hearing stories of how they worship them almost like gods. My friend says she has learned of a ritual practiced in some clans. It allows a spirit, if it and the host are both willing, to leave the host body without further harm."

"And this doesn't depend on the length of the possession?"

"She didn't think so, although the longer spirits are out of the Fade and have contact with mortals, the more chance that they become corrupted and turn into a demon. I doubt a demon would be willing to submit to such a thing."

"Thank you, Leliana. It's more than I had," I respond.

"Oh, I suppose there is one more thing, but I don't know if it can help you. The Divine has been instructing some of her followers to conduct research, and in particular, she has one researcher looking into the Rite of Tranquility. We may learn more from their studies, should it come to that for your friend."

"My friend considers Tranquility a fate worse than death. I doubt he'd ever let that happen, but thanks for the information anyway."
The trip home by ship takes less than half the time it had taken us to get to Orlais. Before I know it, the ship is pulling into the harbor. It's a bright sunny day, and the seas are surprisingly calm. We arrive in the late morning. I say my goodbyes to Leliana, and we board the smaller boats that take us ashore. Stepping out of the boat and standing on the Kirkwall docks again, I feel a tingle of excitement. *I can't believe I missed this stench. I'm home.*

Fenris walks up next to me, and stops. I smile up at him, and he returns it. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a familiar green shimmer appearing and my grin widens. “Cat's here,” I say to Fenris. He looks around but doesn't seem to pick out her shape. “She's good at hiding. I'm going to head home so I can talk to her.”

“Home,” he says, his smile faltering. I know he's thinking about Anders, who probably still lives at my place. He continues, “Yes, I should speak with Aveline. I had her watching for something while I was gone.” We both start walking back toward Lowtown. The damage done in the Qunari uprising seems to have mostly been repaired, but there are a few piles of rubble that remain as reminders of the fighting.

When we reach my street, I have an idea. “I don't have a job there anymore, but we could meet up later at the Hanged Man.” I suggest. “I'm sure everyone will want to see you.”

“Maybe,” he answers.

“Alright,” I say. I'm a little disappointed, but I can't really ask more of him right now when even I don't know what's going to happen. I turn to head toward my house.

“Norah, wait,” he says. I turn to look back. He runs his hand over his hair in what I now know is a nervous gesture. I say nothing, but wait for him to speak. “If you...if things do not go well, I have room for you at my mansion if you have need.”

“Thanks,” I say, giving a small bow of my head. “I may have two houses, but I'm not sure if I can use either of them right now.”

With one last look, he turns and walks back toward Hightown. I head down the street from my place, and past the door to where I stashed a spare key. It's hidden in a small compartment in the bottom of a lamppost. Thankfully, it's still there.

I feel my heart beating wildly as I put the key in the lock and turn it. I open the door, and am slightly relieved to find no one home. The bed is made, which it hadn't been the day I left. I'm struck with a memory of that last morning. Being here brings it all back, his kisses, his touch, the faint scent of herbs, and something undefinable that is just Anders.

From the looks of things, Anders hasn't used this space in a while. A tiny layer of dust coats some of the surfaces. *Maybe he had too many memories here, too.*

Cat appears next to me. “He's not here, you know.”

“I can see that. I'm happy you're here, Cat,” I say, and open my arms to embrace her. She allows it, but doesn't return it.

“What's wrong, Cat? What's happened?”

She thinks for a moment before responding. “It's probably better if you just see it for yourself. He's at his clinic.”

“Alright, let me get changed first,” I say, and move to find something else to wear. I've been wearing
my leathers so long they're starting to feel like a second skin. I find a simple dress, the one I wore when I first went to see Orsino. The day Anders had come back from the Deep Roads. I remember his face as he was frantically looking for me, sure that I'd run into trouble. How could I have forgotten this feeling? My heart is heavy. I want to see him.

Recent events have made me extra cautious. I'm not leaving the house without my daggers and my staff both. I swap out the apprentice staff for the one I had taken from Nikolaus. This one really does feel good in my hands. I'm not sure what enchantments have been laid upon it, but magic hums through it. I throw a light cloak over myself to hide the weapons and head back out.

Cat and I find our way easily through Darktown. I see no sign of the Carta, but then again, we aren't near my safehouse. I make a mental note to check on Telun when I get a chance.

I really need to check on everyone. Fenris was right: Talon still presents a threat. I don't know what that means for my stay in Kirkwall, but I'm not leaving this time without at least telling everyone about the danger. I feel a sense of guilt, wondering how the others had taken my disappearance. Had Anders or Corff told them about us leaving?

I climb the final set of stairs that lead up to the clinic. The door is open, and a man is walking out. I don't know him, and I wait until he leaves before I enter. Anders is the only one inside. He stands over his table, looking at a messy pile of documents. It's only been a few weeks, but he looks older, more haggard. His hair has grown again, and I think he may have lost weight. His robes are different, too. Black? That's new. He doesn't look up.

“Hello,” I say, suddenly nervous.

His eyes flick upwards, looking at me then over to Cat. Seems he can see her just fine now too, even when she's hiding. “She told me you were back,” he comments.

“Yes. Colette won't be a threat anymore,” I tell him. “There's more we need to discuss, though.”

“I'm listening,” he states, looking back at his desk. Cold. I guess maybe I deserve that.

I decide it's best to just forge ahead with it. “I didn't come back empty handed,” I say. “I found an old contact from my days in the Game, and I learned of a possible way to separate you and Justice.”

“That won't be necessary anymore,” he replies, looking at me with a serious expression. “Justice and I are one now. He's helping me do things I wouldn't have been able to do without him.”

My jaw drops. “Horseshit,” I retort, getting angry. “That's him talking, not you.” He frowns at me, but I step closer. “I did not go through what I did just to lose you to him now.”

He blinks a few times, and his expression turns a little sad. “You were right to leave. I never thought in a million years I'd be grateful that someone else was in love with my girl, but I trust Fenris to take care of you.”

Ouch. My guilt weighs on me. “I'm not with Fenris,” I say, and remember saying something similar to him before.

“He loves you, it's obvious. You could be happy. There's nothing left for you here, Norah.”

“Oh, really?” I say, my hurt feelings conveyed in my tone. I walk even closer, until I'm standing right in front of him. “Prove it,” I say, and I stand on my toes to kiss him.
I press my lips to Anders's, and feel a split second of panic when he doesn't respond. But then his arms crush me in a tight embrace and I know he hasn't forgotten me either. His kisses are fierce and possessive, and when he finally pulls back, we're both breathing heavy.

"Maker, woman, you're like a drug to me," he says, sighing, and returns his mouth to mine for another, softer kiss.

I lean my forehead against his. "That's us, though, right? Always doing the wrong thing."

He smiles at me, and his kisses continue, gentle, urging. I feel my cloak drop to the floor. His hands start roaming my back and I begin to feel a familiar ache.

With one motion, he knocks the papers off the table and guides me into a sitting position on it. He kisses my jaw, and then my neck, and his name escapes my lips on a whisper. His hands pull up my skirt and he stands between my thighs, his mouth hungry on mine.

A voice calls out from the doorway. "Starting without me? Now that's not fair."

I bury my head in Anders's chest and laugh. I hear a soft chuckle from him as well before he pulls away from me.

"Isabela," I say, standing up and fixing my skirts. "Your timing sucks."

"Oh I don't know, it looked pretty good from where I'm standing," she remarks appreciatively. Looking to Anders she says, "I see what you mean about the sounds she makes."

He frowns at her, and she comments, "Hey, I'm not the one who left the door open." Turning to me, she add, "But it is good to see you two 'reconnecting', puss. He's been a grouchy shit ever since you took off. Maybe things will be fun again with you back in town."

"It's good to see you too. I was worried when I didn't see you before the Qunari thing."

She grimaces. "Yeah, about that...uh, never mind."

"Was there a reason you came?" asks Anders a bit impatiently.

"I ran into Fenris. He told me Norah was back, and had news about Talon," she reports. "Now, I think he knew what you two would be up to and sent me in to break it up."

I blush. *Change the subject. She mentioned Talon.* "Talon, yeah," I start, obviously deflecting. "Turns out my father is working for him, at least if my aunt is to be believed. She's a pretty good liar."

"The templar?" asks Anders.

"Wait, your dad is a templar?" asks Isabela, laughing. "Varric's going to love that one."

"He was a templar. As in formerly. He left the order and ran away with my mother," I say,
shrugging. “It seems Colette only continued to hunt me because of pressure from Talon. According to her, either my father or Nikolaus told him something that made him want to capture me. I don't know what, but she implied that it has something to do with Cat.”

“So we're going to see more of that bastard and his people,” Isabela says. “I want to get back at him for what happened to Marco. I knew Marco, and he wouldn't have willingly served him like that. But puss, I don't want end up like one of his men. Maybe it's better if we stay out of his way.”

“I agree, the man is dangerous. From what you described before, he's involved with something dark, probably demons, or blood magic,” says Anders.

“I know,” I admit. “I came back to warn everyone. I made you all a target, and I'm sorry. Unfortunately, I don't think leaving will help with this one. I mean for starters, I don't even know where to look for him. I just know he'll try again eventually.”

“When were you going to mention this?” Anders asks accusingly.

“I...got a little distracted,” I say, my face hot. He smiles a little at that.

“Isabela, can you get everyone together at the Hanged Man tonight?” I ask. “I'll fill them all in then.”

“Right. I'll just shut the door on my way out then,” she says, grinning. She walks to the door, and backs out, slowly closing it. I laugh again.

The look on Anders's face isn't encouraging when I turn back to him. “Don't shut down on me now, Anders; we were doing so well.”

“You don't understand. Things changed while you were gone. The injustices against the mages have grown. More and more Tranquil are being seen in the Gallows courtyard. I couldn't stand by anymore. Justice and I...I fear it's too late for what we could have been, Norah.”

“What are you talking about? What have you done?” I ask gently, touching his arm.

“Nothing I want to involve you in,” he says, and his brow furrows.

“Let me help you,” I say.

“Maker, no. No, none of this will come back on you,” he insists, and I'm even more concerned. “No matter what happens, I'm glad I got to see you again.”

“Why does that sound like a goodbye?” I ask, and a sick feeling starts in my stomach. He doesn't answer. “Damn it, Anders. Talk to me.” When he still doesn't respond, I turn to where I know Cat is.

“Cat, help me.”

She just shakes her head, her eyes downcast. “You knew what I thought of this from the beginning.”

I pound my fist uselessly against his shoulder. “I still love you,” I say, the words ripped from my lips before I can hold them back.

“I know love, and I'm sorry,” he says. “Justice and Vengeance are too intertwined now. It's hard to tell them apart. But loving you has been the best wrong decision I ever made. I wish things could be different.”

“Then let them be different. Let me stay with you. You don't have to tell me everything; Maker
knows I've had my share of secrets. But that kiss just now told me you still want me too.”

He looks indecisive. “I never could say no to you,” he says, sighing.

“Can I come see you later then?” I ask, anxious, but hopeful.

He nods. “I've been staying here again.”

“Okay. I need to go see Fenris before I meet with everyone later.”

He grabs my hand, stopping me. “Are you sure you want this?” he asks. “You could still go to him, have a better life. I can only offer you pain.”

“Anders, we chose each other once before. I may have left for a while, but I still choose you.”

Cat stays with Anders. I hurry to Hightown to meet Fenris, but there's no answer at his house. I remember he said something about meeting with Aveline.

I feel awkward going into the Viscount's keep, but Brennan tells me Aveline left some time ago. Odd. With nowhere else to go, I head toward the Hanged Man. I'll be early for the meeting, but I can get something to eat. As if on cue, my stomach growls, making the decision for me.

Walking into the Hanged Man, I'm surprised to see Fenris already here, with Hawke, Aveline, and Varric. Corff is missing from behind the counter. He's always there; what's going on?

Fenris growls out, “Shut your mouth, Danarius.”

The mage in front of him replies, “The word is master.” Oh shit.

I release the clasp on my cloak and toss it into the corner. I free my staff from my back and make ready for battle. Danarius runs into the back hallway, and several men attack us. These must be Danarius's slavers. I call my magic to life, and cast a glyph of warding under Fenris. Noticing it, he glances back at me before turning back to Danarius. I wince. I hadn't meant to distract him, just help with a boost. I guess I should have noticed he didn't bring any mages with him. Hawke and Aveline give me shocked expressions, but I ignore them, and continue brandishing my staff.

The slavers are the first to attack. I sling spells from my staff, relishing the feeling of using magic again. A rush of power courses through me, and I cast Haste. Hawke twirls into the thick of the slavers, using her long daggers in the slashing fashion I had witnessed before. Aveline rams her shield into a target, knocking him prone, as Varric pins him to the ground with a crossbow bolt from his beloved Bianca. Fenris attempts to get closer to Danarius, but is intercepted by another of his men.

I notice a female elf standing off to the side. She doesn't move, just stands there looking sadly at the ground. Who is that? We never get many elves in the Hanged Man. Maybe she's new. I parry a dagger slash from my left with my staff, and get a few hits in myself with the bladed end. I cast a spirit bolt, and he loses his balance, slipping to the floor. Grasping my own dagger in one hand, I move in and find a vulnerable spot. I sheathe the dagger again quickly and look for my next target.

Danarius is still standing in the back hallway, out of the fight, a barrier surrounding him. Blood magic, from the looks of it. Great.

I work my way closer, but am confronted with a shade. It pops out of the ground in front of me,
startling me. I dodge backwards, nearly tripping over a chair. *This really isn't the best place for this fight.*

I charge the fireball spell. Between my discussion with Anders and wanting to defend Fenris against Danarius, I have plenty of anger and hurt to fuel it this time, and I stun the shade with my first shot. Aveline moves in to take over. I move on inward.

A rage demon rises between Fenris and I, all fire and lava. The Winter's Grasp spell freezes it and holds it steady as Hawke puts her daggers to good use.

Another small movement forward. Fenris has reached Danarius, but can't get in close due to the barrier. I see a wobble in the magic, and I know what that means. “Fenris, his barrier is weakening, he won't be able to hold it much longer. Be ready,” I shout, and give us both a boost with another Haste spell. The barrier falls, and Fenris lays into him with his claymore. I throw a few spirit bolts his way. Danarius is on the defensive, but damn, he's strong. He disappears in a another swirl of magic.

He reappears behind me, and I'm taken off guard. Before I can reorient myself, he twists my arm behind my back, and pulls me against him as a shield. My staff clatters to the ground.

I see Fenris's resolve falter, and I give him a tiny shake of my head. *Okay, Norah, this is going to be difficult, but you can do this. You're familiar with the spell. Just focus. Control.*

“As I was saying, pet. The word is master,” he snarls, but I continue with the concentration. Releasing the spell, I feel the cold of magic shoot up my back. It hurts, but I can't stop now. Danarius's body stiffens behind me. I can't move out of his grip, but I can still speak.

“Do it, Fenris,” I say.

He moves behind both of us, and I see the blue glow from around Danarius's body. I hear something hit the floor. The spell fades, and Danarius falls backwards. Unfortunately his arm hasn't released its hold, which means I fall as well. I wince at the pain in my shoulder. Fenris puts a boot on Danarius's chest, and helps free me. I stand, brushing off my skirt. I shiver.

Fenris storms over to the elf standing on the other side of the room.

“I had no choice, Leto,” she says, her stance defensive. *Leto? It dawns on me-- the sister.* “He was going to make me an apprentice. I would have been a magister.”

“You sold out your own brother to become a magister?” he asks, his tone furious.

“You have no idea what we went through. What I've had to do since mother died. This was my only chance.”

“And now you have no chance at all,” he growls, moving toward her menacingly.

“Elf,” says Varric from behind him. “Don't. It won't help.”

“Fenris does as he likes,” comments Hawke.

The glow starts again. “I would have given you everything.” He moves toward the elf girl.

I'm moving before I even realize it. “Fenris, don't do this to yourself,” I say and put my hand on his arm. The magic burns my hand like fire, and I hear the sizzle of my own flesh. He thrusts his hand widely, knocking me backwards. I land awkwardly, hitting my head on one of the support beams. I see stars, and can't seem to focus my eyes.
I hear Fenris say, again in that angry, gravelly tone, “Get out.” I sense motion to the one side. *Good, please don't let him hurt her, he'll never forgive himself.*

Her voice sounds from behind me, “You said you didn't want this, but that's not true. You wanted it, you competed for it. When you won, you used the boon to have Mother and I freed. But freedom was no boon. I look at you now and think you got the better end of the bargain.”

It's probably only a minute or two, but it feels like an eternity before my vision returns and the room stops moving by itself. I hold my non-burned hand to my aching head. Fenris stares down at me. He's covered in blood, and his expression is vague, confused.

“I thought you were going to tell me when you found her,” I say weakly to him.

“You were busy,” he replies, lips pressed in a tight line.

“I still would have come if you'd asked me.” I look away, feeling guilty, and hiss in pain at the moment.

He flinches, noticing my injuries for the first time, and looks away as if he can't bear to see it. “Let's go,” he says to someone over my head. “I need to get out of here.”
Fenris leaves with Hawke and Aveline. Varric stays, and tries to help me up. I'm pretty short for a human, but the height difference still makes it awkward. Thankfully dwarves are strong and sturdy.

“Shit, Cookie, you do know how to make an entrance, I'll give you that,” he comments.

“Hey Varric. I guess I kind of made a mess of things, huh?”

“Things were already a mess. But your timing could use some work,” he adds. “You should probably give Broody a while to cool off.”

“Yeah, I’d probably just make an even bigger mess if I tried right now,” I respond with a sigh. I don’t regret stopping him. Killing his sister would have eaten away at Fenris, I know it. I had made a promise to him, and I feel good about keeping it, but the look on his face before he left reminded me of my reaction to the tight corridor of the mage underground tunnel. I know panic when I see it. I’ll need to talk to him at some point, but Varric’s right, probably best to give him a little time. At least he has Aveline with him.

I make it to my staff. Picking it up, I cast Heal, and am rewarded with the cool sensation of energy. I sustain the spell for a few seconds until I start to feel the fatigue, and let it go. I'll still probably have a headache later, but my head and shoulder feel much better. My hand, however, hasn't healed at all. I look at it, and see the all-too-familiar pattern of vines burned into my skin. I remember touching Fenris's arm right as he tried to attack his sister. The lyrium tattoos. I feel like there's something I'm missing. I may have had a tutor from Tevinter, but the magic involved in those markings is beyond me.

“Come on, Cookie, I have some bandages back in my room,” he says, looking at my hand. The comment strikes me as funny. “Trying to get me alone? What will Bianca think?” I ask.

“You're right, she's usually the jealous type,” he says, shrugging. “I think she'll make an exception for this.” He gestures for me to follow. “We shouldn't be out here, anyway. We'll let them...er, clean up.” The room is full of bodies from the fight, and Varric and I have to move our way around them.

“By the Dread Wolf!” I hear Merrill call by the doorway. She's arrived along with Isabela. “What in the world happened here?”

Isabela gives me a look. “Always starting without me! I can't believe it,” she says, exasperated. I can't help but grin.

“Not all my doing. We're going in the back,” I tell her. “I think you're the only ones who will probably show up now. Unless you got in touch with Sebastian?”

“I sent word, but I think he was meeting with the Grand Cleric about something.”

We settle in to Varric's suite. I fill Merrill and Varric in on what happened with my aunt, and the connection with Ser Aron and Talon. It doesn't take long.
“But Talon and his men lost their way to track you now, right?” Merrill asks.

“As far as I know,” I acknowledge. “Colette could have been lying. She was a master at it; I might not have been able to tell. I looked around her place a bit before we left, and I didn't see any signs of more vials. If Talon knew about them, though, he probably has at least one. I'm also back in Kirkwall, one of the last places his people found me. I'm not going to be hard to find as it is.”

“Are you thinking of leaving town again?” Varric asks.

“I have thought about it, but with or without me here, you are all in danger,” I admit. “I hate the thought that he would try something after I left. I'd rather be able to be here to fight him with you.”

“Yeah, I'm kind of on his shit list at the moment, too,” says Isabela. “But I do have a ship now,” she adds, flashing her teeth in a wide smile.

“That's fantastic!” I exclaim. “I'm really happy for you, Captain Isabela.”

“I think I'll stick around for a bit longer, too. I'm not used to having friends like you and Hawke; it's kind of nice.”

“Why are you lumping me together with Hawke?” I ask, not happy at the thought.

“I'd trust both of you to watch my back, and that's saying something,” she says. I'm surprised when she doesn't make some kind of dirty comment about it, but she seems to be sincere without joking for once.

“Thanks,” I say, acknowledging the compliment. “I don't think my life would be as much fun without you either.”

“Merrill, I'm glad to see you too,” I say, remembering how we'd parted. I need to apologize. “I'm sorry things went the way they did with our trip to your clan. I know it's no excuse, but I was desperate to find a way to help Anders.”

“No, I think I knew that, Norah,” she says, her face sullen. “But none of it matters now.”


“My clan is gone,” she says, and chokes back a sob. “I tried to help them, and they couldn't believe in me. Keeper Marethari...she allowed herself to be possessed by the spirit that had helped me. She thought she was saving me, and they're all dead now. If only we had never found that mirror...”

“Oh Merrill...I'm so sorry. I should have been here for you,” I say. I sit next to her, and throw an arm over her shoulders in comfort. She's a bit startled, but doesn't break away. I pat her arm with my good hand.

“Varric?” I ask after a bit.

“Yes?” he asks.

“How's your brother?” I ask. Might as well get all of the news.

“About the same. Sometimes I wonder if we really did the right thing, bringing him back. But I still think I'd make the same choice if faced with it again. They may be nug-shit crazy and homicidal, but you only get one chance at family.”

“Isn't that the truth,” I remark. “I thought I was going to kill my aunt. I never thought I'd pity her.”
“Can we all go back to being happy about my ship?” asks Isabela.

“Yes. Thank the Maker for some good news for once.”

Leaving Varric’s suite, I see Corff overseeing the removal of the bodies from the main room of the bar. I give him a small wave. “Somehow I knew you’d be involved in this,” he says, shaking his head.

“Not all her doing,” Isabela yells over my shoulder. “What? That’s what you said before.”

“You back for long?” he asks.

“Not really sure yet. I just got back,” I say.

“Let me know if you want your job back. It's tough finding help that will stay when things like this keep happening,” he says, motioning to the blood stains left on the floor.

“Thanks, but I think my days of serving tables may be over.”

“That's good, you were awful at it,” quips Varric from behind me. “Got my drinks wrong for months,” he says in a low conspiratorial tone.

“Seriously guys?” I say, but laugh, regardless. “And that was intentional, I'll have you know. I was an excellent barmaid.”

“I don't really have much to compare it to,” says Merrill, ending that line of conversation. “I need to get back to the Alienage. I can usually find my way around now, but it's harder after dark.”

“I'll walk you,” says Isabela.

I watch the two of them walk out. Turning to Varric I ask, “You don't suppose the two of them...”

“Oh yeah, for a while now. I think it started after the thing with her clan.”

“Oh, didn't see that one coming. It makes sense, though, they've always been close.”

“Yeah. Speaking of, you and Blondie are back together again? Did I hear that right?” he asks.

“Seems I can't stay away,” I answer, shrugging.

“Just be careful. He's not been himself lately.”

“So I've heard,” I respond, nodding. “Thanks for worrying about me. You're a good friend, Varric.”
Chapter 52: Truth and Promises

I keep to the familiar shadows on my way to Darktown. No bandits, no gangs. The streets seem a lot more subdued these days. I don't really want to give her the credit, but maybe Hawke's influence can do some good. I think about Isabela's ship and smile.

Anders is alone again in the clinic. I walk in, and shut the door behind me.

He looks up when I shut the door, but doesn't move toward me. “I'd half hoped you would change your mind about this.”

“Never,” I say, smiling at him. *If he won't come to me, I'll go him.* I take a few steps before his expression changes. He's looking down at my hand and frowning.

“You're injured. What happened?” he asks, immediately concerned.

I give a sigh of frustration. “I guess we're doing the talking thing first then.”

He exhales, shaking his head, and walks toward me. He puts an arm around me. “Trust me, I definitely have other things I'd like to do too. But this comes first,” he insists.

I smile. *Good, he's still himself. I was worried.*

“So I went to see Fenris, right? But he wasn't at home. He was at the Hanged Man, with Danarius.” I explain, and see his eyes widen in surprise.

“How is it I always miss everything?” he asks, shaking his head.

“You didn't want to be there, it was a disaster. There were slavers, and demons. Danarius himself was one tough son of a bitch. When it was over, Fenris went after his sister, who had tricked him into meeting her. I went to stop him, but then this happened. I thought his markings just made his body intangible. I had no idea it would do this.”

He peels back the bandages, and hisses when he sees the burn.
I tell him, “I tried healing it with magic, and even drank a potion on the way here. Nothing works.”

He examines it with a practiced eye. “This looks like spirit damage. Norah...what were you casting at the time?”

“I wasn’t, I just wanted to calm him, to make him come to his senses. I knew he'd feel worse if I let him kill his sister.”

“Are you sure? Were you holding your staff at the time?”

“Well yes, but I don’t see...wait, you think I cast something by accident?”

“It would explain what I’m seeing. Your spell must have conflicted with Fenris’s markings somehow.”

My mind races and I'm flooded with memories. A drunken Anders clinging to my hand, Fenris and I sleeping next to one another to keep the nightmares away, bringing Bartrand back from the red lyrium, holding Merrill, hugging a grieving Bethany. I’d thought I was just giving them comfort, but all this time, I'd been doing something far worse.

“What are you thinking right now?” he asks.

“I think I've been doing it for a long time. I've been using magic on people and I didn't even know it.” I'm horrified as I stare at my injured hand. I'm suddenly aware that Anders is still holding me. I back away from him. Confusion crosses his features.

“Maybe you weren't far off when you called me a drug. I thought I was just comforting them, but I think I've been influencing people's minds this whole time, Anders. If that's true, I'm no better than a blood mage,” I cry, shame coloring my words. I feel a tear slide down my cheek. “No wonder Talon wanted to find me. I assumed it was about Cat, but it has to be this.”

“Norah, love, stop,” he says, putting an arm around me again. “You have a rare gift, that's all. It's unusual, but I don't think it's evil. Your intentions are good, don't let doubt cloud that for you. Your talent is probably the only reason Cat has persisted outside the Fade as long as she has. Speaking of, where is she?”

“I asked her to give us some privacy,” I answer, a little embarrassed.

“Right.” He chuckles and plants a kiss on top of my head.

“Then you're not afraid of me? What if you only have feelings for me because of my magic?” I ask, feeling sick.

“I don’t think that's even possible,” he states. “I don't see this ability as any different than your music. You can create a better mindset, a stronger will with your singing. This is just another manifestation. You and your gift are the reason I fight for mages. If you had been in a Circle, they probably would have wanted to make you Tranquil out of fear. But as far as I can tell, you've never harmed anyone with it, only helped. If anything, it makes me love you even more.”

I doubt he could have said any sweeter words to me than that. “Anders...” I say, looking up at him. He plants a quick kiss on my lips, but steps away from me after that.

“I have a balm that's specific to spirit damage. It should help.”

He grabs a flask from the other side of the room. The balm does indeed help, and I watch as the skin
starts to heal. After a few minutes, all that remains is a vine-shaped scar. *I guess I'll probably always have it as a reminder.*

“Does it still hurt?” Anders asks.

“No,” I say, flexing my fingers. “I think it's okay now.”

“Good. Now I can focus on other parts of you,” he says, a sparkle in his eyes.


“Love, you have no idea,” he replies, and kisses me. I kiss him back, pouring my emotion into it. *I love this man.* He slides his fingers along my jaw, and trails one finger down my neck. I moan into his mouth.

Practiced hands caress my body. I ache for him, and start pulling at his clothing. I want him, now. I don't think I can wait.

“Sweet Norah, always so impatient,” he mutters. He grabs my hand and leads me toward the bed. He sits down, leaning against the wall and motions for me to sit on his lap. I grin at him, and reach up under my skirt to pull off my panties. I toss them aside, along with my cloak.

“I don't want to wait, Anders; I want you now, please,” I beg, crawling over to him. He pulls me on top of him, bunching up my skirt around my hips. I, in turn, tug at fastenings of his robes, opening them to reveal his bare skin.

“Show me, Norah, love. Show me that you want me,” he says, looking at me with his eyes bright with passion.

I reach between my legs to grab hold of his length, and guide him inside me. I lower myself slowly, and I whimper at the sensation. Anders leans up to capture my lips in a kiss, his hands kneading my breasts. I ride him, gently at first, then with rising intensity.

“I love you,” he says between kisses.

“I love you too,” I say back to him. He grabs my hips and stills me, only to arch his own, controlling the rhythm of our bodies moving together. I cry out his name as he pushes me to a climax, but he isn't finished yet.

He pulls me closer, our chests now touching, his breath hot next to my ear. He growls a familiar word, “Mine.”

“Always,” I respond on a sigh. I cling to his shoulders as our movements change again, and I can tell he's close. His arms squeeze me in a tight hold, and he thrusts upward into me fiercely one last time.

We stay connected for a moment, sharing feather-light kisses. I shift off of him, and move to lay by his side, our faces turned toward one another. He grasps my hand.

“I had given up hope of ever touching you like that again,” he comments.

“So you don't want me to change my mind anymore?” I joke.

“Shush, love, perish the thought. Actually,” he says, tracing the new lines of my scar, “I have a thought about your power.”

“What's that?” I ask.
“When you were gone, I was lost. It was foolish, but I couldn't bear to blame you for leaving, so I blamed the templars who came for you that forced your hand. Justice and I saw enemies around every corner. But then you came back, and Maker, when you kissed me...I think it helped clear my mind a little. I feel more like myself than I have for a long time. I don't know if that's magic, or just you.”

“Whatever the reason, I'm glad you're still you,” I tell him, squeezing his hand.

“For as long as it lasts,” he sighs, the mood suddenly broken. “Don't forget your promise to me, Norah.”

“I haven't,” I promise, my tone serious. I raise our joined hands to my lips and kiss his knuckles. “But you're not beyond saving yet. Oh, that reminds me. The information I got from my contact. Apparently the Avvar people have a ritual to release a spirit from a host body. Of course, the spirit has to be willing to leave. Do you think Justice would cooperate?”

“I'm not sure, maybe. He seems determined to help the mages here. I don't know if he will be willing to leave until...”

“Until after the thing you can't tell me about,” I finish, sighing in frustration.

“Yes,” he states plainly. “Everything will change after that. I'll finally be able to take my place among free mages.”

*That's kind of cryptic, the way he said that.* “Then I'll start planning out our trip.”

He doesn't say anything to that for a few minutes. And then, finally, he sighs. “Get some sleep, Norah, we can talk about it again in the morning.”
Plans

Chapter 53: Plans

Anders is already awake and sitting on the edge of the bed when I open my eyes. I forgot that he's an early riser. In fact, I can only remember a handful of times that I was up before him. I stretch, and give him a sleepy smile. “It's so nice waking up to you again in the morning, lover.” He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. He's still troubled.

I sit up next to him. “I wish I could make this go away,” I say, running my fingers across the furrow in his brow.

“Norah,” he says, frowning even more. He reaches for me, and I go to him. We make love again that morning, tender and slow. When it's over, we both get up and get ready for the day.

“What are your plans for today?” he asks.

I sigh, and look down at the scar on my hand. “I'm going to stop by my place and change, but then I need to find Fenris and talk about what happened. I'm worried he's blaming himself right now. Hawke was with him when he left last night, but I don't trust her.”

He nods. “Alright. You're taking Cat with you, right?”

I cock my head slightly. “Why?”

“Just a bad feeling. Indulge me,” he replies.

“Okay, fine. What about you - what are your plans?”

“I have something with Hawke in little while,” he answers.

“Be careful, love,” I urge him, and give him one last kiss. “I should get going. I'll see you later.”

“Goodbye, Norah,” he responds.

I frown at his tone, but he doesn't give me any more, turning back around to grab his belongings. I set off for my place again. I need a bath, and a change of clothes.

* * * * *

The trip back to Lowtown is quick. I stop at the fruit vendor and pick up a couple of pieces, one familiar, and another new one. This one is a cluster of berries in a dark blue color. I'm not sure what to make of it yet, but Cat will be interested. I thank the vendor, and pop a few in my mouth as I head to my place. They're tart, but tasty. Cat's familiar shimmer follows next to me.

Fenris is pacing in front of my door when I get there. I stop in surprise, and when he turns back around, he sees me.

“Fenris? I was planning to come to see you later,” I state. He sought me out? I was thinking it would be hard to get him to want to meet with me after what happened yesterday.

“I had to see you. I owe you an apology,” he says, reaching for my hand. I back away, shaking my
“I don't think it's a good idea for you to touch me right now,” I tell him.

His expression falls, and I see the guilt there. “No, no, Fenris, I'm not scared of you. I don't mean that. I know what happened was an accident. Maker, I'm making a mess of this. Do you want to come in? We can talk inside.”

He frowns in confusion, but follows as I open the door. “Oh, by the way, Cat is with me,” I announce, and she materializes with a wave after I shut the door behind us.

“Hello Cat,” Fenris responds in greeting.

I open the window shade and let in a little light. My place is still dusty. “Sorry, I haven't really been here but a few minutes since we got back, I haven't had a chance to clean the place up yet.”

“You spent the night with Anders then,” he concludes.

“Yes,” I admit. “But that's not what I wanted to talk about. I need to show you something.”

Holding my hand in the light from the window, I uncurl my fingers away from my palm and show him the scar. He pales, recognizing the pattern. “Varric said you were burned, but that's not possible. The markings have never done that before.”

“No, this wasn't your fault, it was mine. I didn't know I was doing it at the time, but apparently I have a rare gift that lets me use spirit magic by touch. Something about it didn't react well when you were using your markings,” I explain, and wait for his reaction.

“You were casting magic on me?” he questions, wary. “What did you do?”

“I'm not really sure. I just knew I wanted to stop you from hurting your sister. I wanted to calm you, clear your head. I guess my magic read that intention and tried to pass it on to you.”

“Fasta vass, mind control? That's blood magic,” he growls, and I hear the disgust in his voice.

“It's not blood magic,” announces Cat. “It's something unique to Norah.” I hadn't gotten her opinion on it last night. I guess I should have asked her before I left this morning.

“Trust me, I wasn't happy when I realized what I had done,” I tell him. “That's why it isn't a good idea to let me touch you. I think I may have been doing it for some time.”

Awareness dawns on him. “Then the reason I could sleep with you next to me, was...”

“My magic, yes, I'm pretty sure. I wanted to help you with the trauma and nightmares, and because I happened to be touching you, the magic followed. Anders likened it to what I do when I sing. It sounds like a fair comparison.”

“Can you control it?” he asks.

“Until last night, I didn't even realize I was doing it. So, probably not, at least not yet. It's only happened when I wanted to soothe others. Like a healing spell, or a bard song.”

Cat speaks up again, “I'd say it works similarly, giving a boost to mental resilience and will. It doesn't seem to have hurt anyone so far. Well, except for your hand, Norah.”

“So far,” he repeats, taking a step back from me.
“It's alright, I won't touch you if you don't want me to,” I say, and I catch myself. That's what I had said when the despair demon was showing me the dream version of Fenris. Had it known more than I did? I look down at my hand again.

“So it...didn't make me... want to touch you?” he asks haltingly. His awkward vulnerability in that statement makes me smile.

“No,” I say, blushing. I can't look him in the eye. That's what he'd been worried about? “I'm pretty sure that's not the way it works.”

“Oh.” His expression is calmer, but he, too, seems embarrassed to have asked the question. He runs a hand through his hair. “Norah-” he starts. Whatever the rest of what he was going to say is drowned out by the loud sound of an explosion. A red light is cast in through the window.

The three of us run outside, pulling our weapons as we go.

Looking up toward Hightown, two twin spires of magical light shine up into the sky from the vicinity of the Chantry. “Oh Blessed Maker,” I gasp. Anders. This was his plan? I search my memory trying to remember what he had said that morning. He said he had 'something to do with Hawke', but didn't specify.

“Cat, do you know where Hawke is?” I ask. She shakes her head.

“You know something,” Fenris points out. “What is it?”

“I'm not sure, but I think Anders may have had a hand in this. He said he was going somewhere with Hawke today. We have to get to them.”

He grabs my wrist, holding it up, “And what do you intend to do if you find him?”

“I...I don't know. I promised I would kill him myself if he was too far gone. I need to see him,” I respond, my head reeling the implications of all this.

“I saw Hawke this morning,” he tells me, letting go of my wrist. “I think I know where she was headed.”

“Please Fenris. If nothing else, you want to go help her, don't you?”

He sighs. “Alright, but stay next to me. She went to the Gallows. This is bound to be outright war between the mages and templars, and you and I will be walking right through it.”

“You're right,” I acknowledge. “No time for armor, I guess. Come on, Cat, let's go.”

*   *   *

Lowtown is a war zone. Flaming debris falls from the sky, igniting fires all over the city. Screams can be heard from a few streets away. We see our first abomination just a block over. It strikes a templar down, his armored form landing in front of us as we round the corner. I use Winter's Grasp to slow the abomination’s pace, and Fenris cuts it down quickly. We move on down the street, toward the sound of more screaming. This is worse than the Qunari uprising .

Heading down the street toward the docks, I see Cecily and Verna, the mages from the mine, cornered by two templars. I cast a glyph of warding under myself and take a few steps forward, but stop dead in my tracks when I see Verna's shape grow and change. Her form twists and grows in size. Her skin bubbles and hisses as she completes the transformation into an abomination. I made
them go back to the Circle. This is my fault. No, I don't have time to get lost in that feeling. Shelve the guilt for later, Norah, Cecily still needs your help.

I use Haste to speed up our actions. “Cat, I'm going to need backup on this one,” I call to her. I have a little experience fighting templars now. It's given me a bit of knowledge on where the weak spots in their armor are. I grab my daggers and run in. With a wide swing of the dagger in my right hand, I ram it up into the space underneath his helmet. I feel the pressure of hitting his skull and wince as I feel it slide under. I give the dagger a firm yank, and it comes out, bringing a few bits of bone and other softer materials with it. The templar falls over, unable to stand, keening in a high-pitched whimper of pain.

The second one turns to face me, but gets hit with a spell from Cecily. I don't know that one, but it's something lightning-based. Nice. Fenris takes advantage of his distraction to reach a glowing hand through his chest, pulling the heart back out with it.

“I love it when you do that,” I shout out to him.

The abomination hasn't waited for me to finish, taking a swipe at me. I swing both daggers across each other in an arc, but it backs away from me, right into Cat's knives. It rears up, clawing wildly at the unseen threat. Cecily to the rescue again with an ice spell. This one shoots a ray of ice forward, which catches the creature that had been Verna, freezing her solid.

“I'm sorry, Verna,” I whisper to her, and step back to allow Fenris to take the final blow, shattering the form that had once been human.

I kick the first templar's sword away from him. He lives, but he's not much of a danger now in his condition.

The three of us look at each other. Well, four, technically, as Cat's there, but she's still in hiding. I don't want to give away her presence if I don't have to.

“You're an apostate!” shouts Cecily in her high-pitched voice. “That makes a lot of sense, now that I think about it. Oh, poor Verna...she made me leave as soon as it started.”

“You should get out of here, it's not safe,” I tell her.

“I think it's safest with you right now,” she comments, eyeing me and Fenris.

“Fine, but if you go all lumpy abomination, I'll never forgive you.”

“Are you sure about this?” asks Fenris.

“Better numbers can't hurt, and we haven't seen any of our other friends yet.”

That's when Sebastian comes up the stairs from the docks.
Sebastian marches up the stairs from the docks, and spots us with Cecily. “Sebastian,” I yell out. “Where's Hawke?”

“Do not speak to me of that blasphemous woman. I-” he cuts off, seeing me with a staff. “Another maleficar,” he growls. “Enjoy your empty victory while you can; when I return, my armies will see to it that there is nothing left of Kirkwall.” He storms off.

I'm left there, mouth agape. “Holy...I wonder what that was about?”

Sebastian had always been at least polite to the mages in our group. Then it dawns on me. The Chantry...Grand Cleric Elthina must have been inside when it went up. But he was angry at Hawke. Does that mean Anders still lives?

“We need to get to Hawke,” Fenris concludes.

I nod. “You're right, we need to know what's happening.”

We head down the stairs and onto the docks. Merrill and Isabela are there.

“There's no use going that way,” Isabela says. “The Gallows are all locked up tight. Luckily, Merrill got out of there before it happened. I ran into her here at the docks.”

“Then you've seen Hawke?” I ask Merrill.

“Yes, but she's done something terrible,” Merrill says. “Meredith called for the Rite of Annulment. Hawke stood by her, although the Circle had nothing to do with the explosion.”

“The Rite of Annulment? You mean the slaughter of everyone inside the Circle! Bethany's in there, how could she?” I yell, my anger getting the best of me. I bet Justice can sense me now.

“Then we have to get in there, Fenris. You know there's only one way. Will you help me?”

“Yes.”

I send him a grateful look, then turn to Isabela. “Isabela, is that spot on your ship still available?”

“Absolutely, but I can't wait long. My ship is anchored a bit up the coast in a small cove. I know the docks themselves at the Gallows are closed, but I can send one of my crewmen out to look for you if you need a ride.”

“That sounds perfect, thank you Isabela.”

“Don’t thank me yet; if he doesn’t see you, he’s totally coming back to the ship and leaving your ass
“Still more than I had. Wait,” I stop and turn to Merrill. “Was Anders with Hawke when you saw her?” The expression on both their faces makes my hope plummet.

Merrill is the one to speak. “I don’t know what happened to him. When Hawke sided with the templars, I had to get out of there, but last I saw them, he was telling her he was ready for death.”

“Shit, so that was a goodbye this morning. If he’s alive when I find him, I am so kicking his ass for this.”

“Not if I get to him first,” Fenris grumbles.

Cecily goes with Merrill and Isabela to the ship to wait for us, and Fenris, Cat and I head for the only other way I know to get inside the Gallows.

* * *

It’s better this time, going through the narrow passageways. I think my anger is keeping any fear in check. Fenris keeps checking on me, but I reassure him that I’m alright. We know the terrain now, that the bridge is sturdy enough to carry our weight, and where the drop-offs are. We make good time up until the final tight cave. I’ve got this, I tell myself, and plunge right in. I take it as quickly as I can. I make it through without stopping, and emerge on the other side. I’m breathing a little heavy, but otherwise fine.

“Are you ready for this?” asks Fenris, coming out behind me. I pull my staff and adjust my grip, then nod.

We climb out of the fireplace into the room that was previously empty. Now the floor is covered in blood, and the bodies of mages. A few templars corpses are there as well, showing that the mages put up a fight, but this was clearly a massacre. I look over the faces of the dead, and I’m relieved to not find Bethany.

We go through Orsino’s study and out to the main stone plaza of the Gallows proper. I see Bethany and Hawke standing together next to a giant...something. What in the name of all that is holy is that? Well, it’s dead, obviously. Varric and Aveline are with them. A blonde woman in dramatic silver armor stands at the exit.

“Back away from her, Meredith,” commands Hawke. Meredith, of course. I signal to Fenris to hold up. We hide in the shadows.

“I see. Have it your way, then, Champion. I will meet you in the courtyard.” Meredith turns on a heel and leaves with her templar guards.


“I’m not about to hurt my own sister,” Hawke replies in that sarcastic tone that makes me want to hit her.

“What is wrong with you? You sided with that lunatic Meredith?” I shout.

“Norah,” Fenris cautions from behind me.

“No, Fenris, she allowed the Rite of Annulment to take place, murdered innocents.”
“Not all innocents,” he comments, looking back at the mangled mess of the...whatever that thing was.

“It's clear where your loyalties would lie, being a mage yourself,” states Hawke, pointing out my staff. “I'm just doing what I can to minimize casualties.”

“By putting your own family at risk? And where is Anders?” I ask, my tone hot.

“He fought well enough against the other mages; I left him to his fate after that,” she answers.

“You bitch! WHERE IS ANDERS!?” I growl, going toward her, with every intent that this time I will smack that look off her face.

Aveline steps up beside Hawke, shaking her head at me. Varric just sighs.

“Norah, this is not helping,” Fenris says.


“He was in the courtyard, last I saw him. I'm headed that way anyway,” she states, and walks out. Aveline and Varric follow. Varric glances back once before leaving, confusion written on his features.

I didn’t mean to make him pick a side, but Hawke was wrong.

“Bethany, are you alright?” I ask, a hand on her shoulder.

“Yes, but it was awful, Norah. Orsino...” she trails off and looks at the hideous dead thing behind her.

“No,” I say, realization dawning on me. That creature had been Orsino? The kind mage who had been my mother's friend, and had helped me. “Why? That stubborn fool. He always said he would protect the mages, whatever it took.”

“Let's get out of here,” suggests Fenris, looking around. I nod, and take position in front of Bethany. Fenris falls in behind her.

Cat is hiding again since there are others around, but I see her glow over by Orsino, and I know she's thinking about him too. We'll have time to grieve later. She joins us as we exit the Gallows through the now open portcullis and enter the courtyard, following the route Hawke had taken.

Meredith and her templars have stopped Hawke, Varric and Aveline. Meredith is saying something, but I can’t hear. I edge a little closer.

“How can I trust that the mighty Champion of Kirkwall is not a worse threat to this city than the Circle?”

“Is helping you destroy the Circle not enough?” asks Hawke, confused.

I have no further time for their conversation, but I'm not surprised Meredith turned on Hawke. That woman is a menace. I need to find Anders, and get Bethany out of here. We stay to the right of the plaza and are nearly out of the gates when I see Knight-Captain Cullen looking over at me - and my staff. I grin and shrug, and we all run out of the plaza. I expect him to raise the alarm, but he doesn't.

That's when I see him. Anders is sitting on a crate near the docks, his head in his hands. I slow my pace.

“You guys can go on ahead,” I tell Fenris and Bethany. “See if you can spot Isabela’s boat. I don't
like the idea of having to go back through the mess in the city to get out. Cat, you keep watch and
tell me if anyone is coming. I need to talk to Anders.” It feels strange to be the one giving orders.
Normally Varric, or Aveline, or even Isabela would be the one making decisions. *It’s a good plan,
Norah. It will work. It has to.*

Fenris looks like he wants to say something, but reluctantly goes with Bethany.

Anders hasn't moved. There is a knife sitting next to him on the crate.

“Lover?” I ask hesitantly.

“Norah...I felt you coming this way. I didn't want you to see me like this. I've been sitting here trying
to build up the courage to end it.”

“Oh no you don't,” I declare, grabbing the knife away from him. “You don't get to leave me the
same way my mother did.” His head sinks lower in his hands with a sob. I toss it away, and it slides
across the dock, falling over into the sea.

There is a commotion from up at the plaza, and I hear the sounds of a fight. *Sounds like Hawke and
her friends are fighting the templars.* I turn, but Cat gives me a gesture saying we're still okay. I turn
back to Anders.

“You need to keep your promise, Norah. I can’t do it myself.”

“Not yet. I don’t believe you’re gone.”

“Justice’s purpose is fulfilled; all I have left is despair.”

“Well, I have something stronger than despair,” I tell him.

“Please don’t say hope, Norah. I don’t think I have the strength.”

“Well, if I was going to say it, I can't very well now, can it?” I tease. “How about curiosity, then? I
always liked her better anyway.”

I walk closer to him, and put my hands on both of his knees. I bend over to look him in the eye. “Do
you have any idea what you've done?” I ask.

“Yes. I removed any chance of a peaceful resolution. What Justice- no, I did...I did for all mages. I
asked Hawke to kill me, but she wouldn’t. I helped her against the very people I wanted to protect. I
don’t expect to be forgiven. No, I have to die.”

The sounds of fighting from the plaza escalate, and there is the flash of red light from time to time.
*Was that magic? Who left up there has magic?* Cat looks worried, and motions me to hurry.

“No, Anders. Listen to me. You know what you did? You created a world where no one can tell us
what to do anymore.”

He looks up at me, tears streaking paths down his face. I reach out and run my fingers through his
hair, continuing, “Word of this will spread, and the other Circles will rise up. You made it so we can
go where we please, and fight anyone who tries to stop us. A place where we can, with a little luck,
someday have little mage babies, and raise them to be good people together, just the two of us. You
have to see that world with me, and live in it. Don't give up on it now, lover.” I pause for a moment,
and add, “Aren't you curious?”
His arms wrap around me, and I hold him for a minute. “We need to get out of here, love; things are getting bad up there with Hawke and Meredith,” I tell him.

“Where can we possibly go? No one will offer me mercy now,” he responds.

“A certain pirate captain has offered us space on her ship. But you have to choose to get up, Anders,” I plead.

“How could you possibly still want to be with me after what Justice and I have done?” he asks.

“You're not beyond saving yet, Anders. Let's go to the Avvar, see if they can help us. I doubt anyone will look for us there. Not even Talon’s going to risk freezing his ass off in the Ferelden Frostbacks.” I extend a hand to him. “Will you come with me?”

He takes it.

Cat joins us a minute later. “Hawke defeated Meredith, and the other templars are acknowledging Meredith's madness. She used red lyrium.”

“Meredith did?” I ask. Cat nods.

“Time to go,” I say.

We hurry to the end of the docks. Fenris looks at us and at our clasped hands, but again says nothing. A small boat is waiting, and someone extends a gangplank to the dock.

Just as we're getting into the boat, a voice sounds out behind us.

“Leaving already?” Hawke asks, walking out onto the pier with Varric and Aveline behind her.
Chapter Summary

With Hawke arriving on the docks, each of her companions is faced with a choice: will they remain in Kirkwall or leave with Norah?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 55: Final Decisions

“Hello Champion,” I greet her, derision obvious in my voice.

“Bethany,” Hawke says, ignoring me. “Where are you going?”

“Sister,” Bethany starts. “I can’t stay here, not with what happened to the Circle. How long would it be before they turned on me, too?”

“They’re talking about making me viscount. I could protect you,” Hawke protests.

“Not even you can be everywhere,” Bethany replies sadly. “I think I’m better off with the others like me.”

“Merrill and Cecily are with us, too,” I state. “Apparently I’m collecting mages.”

Anders laughs at this. I reach out and squeeze his hand, happy he is able to find some humor again already.

Hawke turns to me. “You’ll look after her?”

“Of course. I’ve been Bethany’s apprentice for some time now. She’s like family to me.”

Hawke looks at her sister with a surprised expression. She shrugs. “The First Enchanter asked me to,” she explains.

I sigh. “I’m sad Orsino didn’t make it. He was friends with both your father and my mother in the Circle, you know.”

“You never told me your mother was in the Gallows,” Bethany comments.

“Oh, Maestro, then do I have stories for you…”

Speaking of stories, I think, looking to Varric. “You’re staying, aren’t you?”

“I hear there’s a vacancy for a new Red Jenny if you need help,” I suggest.
“Already way ahead of you. What, did you think I just wrote books while you were gone?” he asks as I gape at him in surprise.

I smile. “Good luck, Varric.”

He gives a small bow his head. “Same to you, Cookie; looks like you're going to need it.”

Aveline stands next to Hawke, her expression neutral. “Aveline, thank you for all you did to help me,” I tell her. “Your post as guard captain makes it obvious what you'll choose.”

“Yes, my duty lies here with the city. Farewell, Norah. Take care of Bethany for me,” she says.

“I will,” I reply.

“And keep that one out of trouble, will you?” she adds, referring to Anders.

“I'll try. We have a plan, anyway,” I state, and Anders nods. *Good, he's on board now.*

Hawke has been looking at Fenris. Neither of them are saying anything.

I step over to the crewman waiting in the boat and ask him something, then return to Fenris.

“This is your decision, but it can wait if you're not sure,” I tell him. “I just asked, and Isabela’s man can drop you off on shore if you decide to stay. Will you come with us at least as far as the ship?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “but one thing first.” He walks calmly over to Anders, balls his right hand up into a fist and punches him in the face. Anders doesn't react, just rubs his jaw.

“That is for dragging Norah into your mess,” he says, and then pulls Anders aside for a moment. I'd love to know what they're saying, but I can't make it out. After a moment, Anders nods, and they return.

“Are you alright?” I ask, concerned.

“Yes,” Anders says. “Just reaching an understanding.” He steps into the boat.

“Goodbye Hawke. Listen to your friends, they're good people,” I advise her with a final wave.

Hawke nods.

The boat pulls away from the dock, and Hawke's form standing on the pier grows smaller and smaller until it eventually fades from our sight.

Before I know it, we're pulling our small boat alongside Isabela’s ship. It was hard to imagine that so recently I'd been happy to step off a ship and be back in Kirkwall, only to be so relieved to be getting back on one now.

We take turns climbing the ladder to the deck. Fenris and I are the last to board. He doesn't move to take the ladder.

“Are you not coming, then?” I ask, saddened.

“A ship full of mages? And this time with no Circle to protect them from their own inherent weaknesses. I hope you know what you're getting yourself into.”
“What we’re getting ourselves into. I won’t be alone. You’ve decided to go back to Kirkwall?” I prod.

He frowns. “Norah, if you had asked me that question a few days ago, I know what my answer would have been. I would have followed you to the ends of Thedas without question.”

“And now?” I ask.

“Now...” he says, trailing off. “I told you that I value my friendships, but I cannot exist in two places at once. Varric and Aveline were right, this city is going to be in chaos for some time. You have someone else to follow you now, but Hawke still needs me.”

“If you’re sure...there's always a place with us, if you change your mind,” I offer.

He's thoughtful for a moment, then says, “You probably don’t remember, but you asked me once what I thought your mother would think about your choices. Do you remember what I said?”

“Of course I remember,” I state. “You said she'd just want me to be happy.”

“And are you?” he asks.

“I think I will be,” I reply honestly.

He nods. “Then it is enough. I am not good at goodbyes, so I will just say farewell. Perhaps we will meet again.”

“Good-bye Fenris,” I say, giving him one last look. “Thank you. For everything.”

I grab hold of the ladder, but immediately let go again, turning around to throw my arms around Fenris in an embrace. “I like the idea of meeting again,” I mutter, and hear him exhale a breath. The hug doesn’t last long, but I do feel a little better for it. “Good-bye, until next we meet.” A sad smile crosses his features, but he nods again.

Sighing, I ascend the ladder. Once I reach the top, Anders gives me a hand over the railing and onto the deck. There are several men on the deck, going about various jobs in preparation for our departure.

I ask Isabela, “You have a crew already?”

“Well yeah, puss,” she says. “I couldn't very well sail off with just you untrained lot, who wouldn't know your port from your aft,” she says, laughing. “But you'll learn. So Fenris isn't coming?”

I shake my head, turning to look. Fenris and the crewman have already cleared a good distance already. I give a wistful smile and turn back to the deck.

“Pity,” Isabela remarks before turning back around.

Anders comes close to me, and puts an arm around my waist, pulling me close and resting his forehead against mine. “I got a little nervous there,” he admits. “You were taking a while.”

“There's no reason to worry, Anders, I made my choice long ago. Yes, I'm sad to see him go, but I think Kirkwall will be better for him being there.” I look down at my hand, and the vine-shaped scar. “And I'll always have a reminder.”

“Ok, now I'm jealous.” He harrumphs. “Norah, tell me again about this future you envision for us,” he says, changing the subject.
“About the mage babies?” I ask.

“Yes, I think we need to talk a lot more about that,” he says, nuzzling my neck. “There is one thing I haven’t mentioned, though. About the Grey Warden Joining ritual.”

“More Grey Warden perks? Just want I wanted.”

“I’m serious, love. Part of it is that it shortens our lifespan. Even if we manage to release Justice, in a little over 20 years, I’ll be gone. If we are lucky enough to conceive, I hope I get to see the people these babies become.”

“Anders, earlier today you didn't see a future past the next few minutes,” I point out. “I'm kind of taking this thing as it comes. Luckily, I'm curious enough for the both of us. We found a possible lead on a way to free you and Justice; maybe we can find a way to stop this Grey Warden thing, too. I'm pretty resourceful, you know.”

“You make me want to believe, love. I just have one question,” he says, holding my hand as we look out at the sea.

“What's that?” I wonder.

“How do you think a kitten would fare on board a ship?” he asks. I smile up at him, and we share a soft kiss.

Thus the story of Norah the Barmaid ends, and the story of Norah the Sailor begins.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, my first fic ever is ending. I felt a little sad when I finished writing it, and now posting it is a little bittersweet, too. But, the sequel, "Adventures of a Former Barmaid" is already in the works, and will follow this timeline of events. Thank you for sticking with it until the end.

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