What Stays and What Fades Away
by Smutnug

Summary

Snippets of Solona Amell, Cullen and Juliet Trevelyan, spanning pre-Origins to the end of Inquisition. Companion to In Plain Sight and In the Light of Day.

(Thanks for all your comments - I'm terrible at coming up with replies but all are loved and appreciated!)
Solona (a demon asleep)

Markham, 9:14 Dragon Age

“That her?”

She didn’t like this Templar, was the sister’s first thought. Greying hair held back in a severe bun, she eyed the little girl like something distasteful and possibly dangerous. The downward curve of her mouth spoke of a permanent expression of disapproval.

“Yes Ser, that's the child.” Solona was blissfully unaware of the Templar’s regard, curly brown head bent over her game of cloth dolls.

“You let her have toys?” The woman's eyes narrowed. “Why is she talking to herself?”

“It’s what children do at that age.”

“That,” the woman said, gesturing with her sharp chin, “is not a child, Sister. It’s a temptation to evil, and a danger to all around it. *A mage is fire made flesh, and a demon asleep.*”

*Blessed are the peacekeepers.* The sister schooled herself to calm. “She’s shown no sign of magic.”

“Yet. Five children, Sister. Remind me how many have been transported to Circles?”

“Four, Ser Templar. But - “

“And this the youngest. It’s only a matter of time.”

The sister’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Where will you take her?”

“Ferelden, as you well know. It matters not where, she won’t be there for long. Another orphanage, until she’s moved to the tower.” The Templar sniffed. “Were it up to me, we’d take her straight there. Better yet, lose the little abomination overboard on the crossing.”

Shocked, the sister glanced at the junior Templar accompanying the hard-faced woman. He wouldn’t meet her eyes, but the tiny shake of his head reassured her - they were tasked with delivering the babe to Ferelden, and would be held accountable if she didn’t arrive in one piece.

“To think what that family has fallen to.” The older Templar looked almost regretful. “They were nearly rulers of Kirkwall, now look at them - criminals, wastrels and apostates all.”

“Will you change her name?”

“Why bother? The name Amell means nothing in Ferelden.”

“Didn’t Lord Aristide’s daughter run away to Ferelden?” The sister regretted her words as the Templar fixed her with a steeley gaze.

“If the apostate Hawke hides in Ferelden, the Order will bring him to heel. And the whore who shelters him will meet the same fate as this one’s heretic father.” Her gauntleted fists clenched and unclenched. “Now. Bring the girl. We will not make the ship wait.”
The sister crouched down next to little Solona. “Are you ready to go, sweetling?” The child regarded her with solemn blue eyes, before raising her pudgy arms. She picked her up, breathing in the smell of her softly curling hair. Solona spared a glance for the dolls abandoned on the floor, then popped a thumb into her mouth. Such a placid child - at least she wouldn’t give the Templar cause to be cruel, if the woman needed any excuse.

A moment’s hesitation and she passed her to the younger Templar, tiny fingers curling in his tabard. “Her things.” It was a pitiful bundle, smallclothes and stockings, a spare smock.

“The child can’t walk?” The senior Templar blinked, incredulous.

“Of course she can, Ser, but - she’s two years old.”

“They won’t coddle her in the Circle.”

*All the more reason to coddle her now.* Thankfully, the man broke in. “She’ll be slow, Ser. We’ll never make it to the docks in time, even if she can walk that far.”

Lips thinned, the woman hesitated before nodding. “We’ll take her from here, Sister. You need not fear for the safety of your charges any longer.”

*I fear for only one of them,* the Sister thought, *and she’s in your hands now.*

“Walk in the Light,” she replied, hand extended in a blessing she hoped would also reach the child. Wide blue eyes watched her over the Templar’s shoulder, until the Chantry door swung closed behind them.

*Maker, watch over her. Keep her safe, keep her strong. What you have created, no-one can tear asunder.*

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*Kinloch Hold, Dragon Age 9:17*

Two robes, taken up at the hem. Smallclothes and a nightshirt, thin leather shoes. A cheaply bound book with pages of blank vellum, in which she practiced her round, childish handwriting. These things were hers, and nothing more - although in truth, even the robes would be taken away when the hem could no longer be let down, replaced with larger robes of identical cut and colour. Given to a smaller apprentice if one came along, but for now she was the smallest.

It suited Solona to be small. To be small was to be beneath notice, and to be noticed was never good. Not in the Tower, where the Templars were always watching. Not in the Chantry orphanage, where the older children had whispered and pinched, where they had finally surrounded her crying “Mage! Mage!” until the Sisters had come and locked her away, and soon after the Templars had arrived to transport her, on horseback and finally over the lake, to the Circle.

It was a circle, corridors going round, round, up and up. Endless stairs that made her small legs burn. Adults in robes, talking over the top of her head. “How old is she? Where is she from? How
Not very, she could have told them. She couldn’t carry a bucket of water on her own. She was from the Chantry, next to the marketplace where the other children were permitted to go sometimes, kindly strangers giving them a copper to spend on a sweet or a spinning top. She watched it from the window, the Sisters keeping their raggedly dressed charges in an orderly line, discouraging small fingers from grasping at fruit or scraps of lace. She wouldn’t have taken things from the market stalls. She would keep her hands tucked in her skirts, keep out from under the feet of the busy men and ladies of Amaranthine. Amaranthine, that was where she was from. Near the ocean, she glimpsed the glittering blue-green water when she rode out of the city gates, face pressed to a Templar’s back.

Here all the children were treated the same - none of them could go outside. If anything her magic was a disappointment to her fellow pupils, more of a spark than a storm. But at least they weren’t afraid of her - “baby” was less of a barb than “demon” or “abomination”. As for “mage”, here it wasn’t even an insult.

So she listened, practiced, kept making round, childish letters on the blank vellum until she could form sounds and words, until the books in the great library proved to hold a world bigger than the tower, bigger even than Amaranthine and the glittering ocean. Until she knew how powerful a spell needed to be to get by in her lessons without attracting the jealousy of her peers or the attention of the Templars. Until the robes were re-hemmed and re-hemmed and finally replaced, until she could take the stairs two at a time, but only when nobody was watching. Until the orphanage was a dim memory, and the Circle was home.
There was a peace to be found in the corridors of the Circle Tower after dark. For the first few weeks, Cullen had patrolled with his hand on his pommel, alert to each sound or movement. When maleficars had proven to be in short supply he had become progressively less vigilant, until he quite enjoyed the solitude of the night patrol. Not that the Circle was particularly raucous at any time, but actively watching the mages always made him feel self-conscious. He wasn’t sure what was more uncomfortable, their barely concealed resentment or the whispers and giggles of some of the younger apprentices.

A Templar was a holy warrior, charged with protecting the world from demons and abominations. A Templar should not blush and stammer.

The mage-lamps and their unflickering light had made him uneasy to begin with. Now they were just part of the scenery, much like the mages themselves in their blue and yellow robes, or the tightly controlled spellcasting that would take place in the library.

The library. It wasn’t part of his patrol tonight, but his rounds took him past the heavy wooden doors. Among some of the templars - unworthy of the name, he privately thought - library patrol was a coveted duty. “More likely to catch some randy mage with his hand up a girl’s robes,” they snickered in the common room. “Don’t interrupt ‘em too soon, you never know what you might see.”

Cullen’s ears burned red just thinking about it. If he were to stumble upon such a thing, Maker forbid, he wouldn’t be lurking in the shadows like a pervert. He’d put a stop to it at once, take the offending mages’ names and send them back to their quarters. Curfews were to be taken seriously, order was to be taken seriously. He would not blush or stammer. He would not.

“Ser, please.” The female voice came from behind the library doors, a note of panic creeping in. “Please, I have permission.”

“Quiet, girl. If you want me to strike you, keep talking.”

Against his better judgement, Cullen pushed the door open. Two faces swivelled towards the noise, but he had eyes for only one - a pair of wide blue-grey eyes set in a pale face, a silent plea.

“What’s going on?” he asked as casually as he could. The terrified girl’s hands were spread flat on the surface of a table, while a Templar gripped her waist hard, scowling at Cullen.

“This mage is breaking curfew.”

Eyes carefully downcast, the girl protested. “I have a note from the First Enchanter. He asked me to fetch a tome from the library.”

Cullen swallowed. Questioning one’s superiors was a sure way to get into trouble, but he didn’t like the way the man’s hand travelled over the curve of the apprentice’s hip. “Have you seen this note, Ser?”

“Stay out of this, recruit.” He groped the girl’s thigh, and she looked on the verge of tears. “If the
note exists, I’ll find it.”

“I told you Ser, it’s it my pouch. On my belt.”

“Shut up, mage.” The templar raised a gauntleted hand and the mage flinched. “I won’t warn you again.”

Cullen could see the pouch - it certainly wasn’t near her thighs. He was under orders to stay out of it, but - “It’s there, Ser. I can see it.” A corner of vellum poked out beneath the flap. When the man ignored him, he darted forward and seized it.

“Apprentice Amell is assisting me with gathering research materials,” he read aloud. “To this end, she has my permission to visit the library after curfew.” He cleared his throat. “Today’s date, Ser.”

“Give me that.” The furious Templar snatched the note from his hand, scanning the spidery lines. “Why didn’t you say as much, stupid girl?” Amell was silent, her eyes fixed on the table. “Hurry up then.” His bleary eyes narrowed on Cullen. “You’re not needed here, Recruit…?”

“Cullen, Ser.”

“Back to your patrol, Cullen.”

Seized by a sudden madness, Cullen addressed the mage. “Did you find your book, apprentice?”

“I…” Her eyes flickered nervously between the two Templars. “Not yet, Ser.”

“I’ll wait and escort the apprentice back to the First Enchanter’s office,” he told the surly Templar. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t get up to any trouble.” He was pleased to hear his voice didn’t shake, anger temporarily overcoming his nerves.

“Suit yourself.” The man hunkered down in his armour, shamelessly ogling the Amell girl where she stretched to reach a high volume.

“Here.” She was startled to find Cullen at her side. “This book? The red one?”

“Yes, Ser.” He handed her the tome. “Thank you.” Those big eyes met his, and he knew she meant the words for much more than the book.

“Come on then,” he said more brusquely than he intended.

Back in the corridor, he tried not to notice the sway of her hips beneath the blue robe. Her thick brown hair was tamed into a braid over one shoulder, wisps escaping at the nape of her neck.

“Does that happen often?” he asked.

“No.” She glanced back at him nervously. “I’m not usually out after curfew. I was helping Irving, and it got late.”

“That’s not…” He trailed off. The girl knew what he meant, and he couldn’t force her to answer. Sometimes no answer was information enough.

“I didn’t see you pass earlier,” he ventured.

“I move quietly.” She spoke quietly too, her eyes fixed on the floor.

“Next time come and find me - I could escort you.” He cleared his throat. “I mean you don’t have
to, obviously, but it would be safer…” Was it wrong for him to suggest that a mage might not be safe in the presence of other templars? He felt uncomfortable criticising his superior, even by implication. “I patrol here every night.”

“I know.”

“You…?” He scratched his neck, flustered. “I'm Cullen.”

“Yes.” She looked back at him again, her face grave. “I'm Solona.”

Solona Amell. “It's a pleasure to meet you.” They had reached Irving’s door. Cullen had met the First Enchanter once or twice - he seemed a kindly man, polite. “Do you…like the First Enchanter?”

“Like him?” She considered this for a moment, twirling her braid in a way he found endearing. “I suppose I do.”

“Good.” She deserved kindness, this pale girl with the serious blue-grey eyes.

“I should…” She opened the door a crack, waiting for his dismissal.

“Of course.” Should he bow? Salute, in the manner of one templar to another? He settled on an awkward wave. “Good night, apprentice.”

Call me Solona, he imagined her saying. But she just nodded, her grave eyes flickering to his face and away. Then the door closed and she was gone.
“Juliet? What is it?”

“I had a nightmare.”

“Again?” Her mother raised a tousled head from the pillow.

“Move over, Clara. She can sleep with us.”

“She's six, George.”

“Exactly. She's a child.”

“Mama?”

Clara sighed. “Come in, then.”

Juliet clambered into the big bed, curling up against her mother. “Thank you, Mama.”

“Tell your Mama about this silly nightmare.”

She opened her eyes, remembering. “I was alone. And then a lady came, and wanted me to go with her.”

“It doesn't sound so frightening, my pet.” Clara was already drifting back to sleep.

“She had dark eyes. And horns.”

“Horns? How terrible.”

“It didn't feel like a dream, Mama. It felt real.”

When there was no answer she lay awake, listening to the soft sound of her parents’ breathing until dawn.

“Who are you talking to, little pumpkin?”

Juliet froze. “Nobody, Papa.”

Bann Trevelyan rose from his desk and crossed the library, kneeling before his small daughter. “But I heard you, pumpkin.” He smiled indulgently. “Do you have an imaginary friend?”

Juliet eyed her shoes. New shoes, of soft blue leather with bows. Why would she want what the
voice offered, when she already had so many pretty things? “She’s not my friend.”

“Oh, she’s not?” A tiny frown marred her father’s face. “Does she have a name?”

*Desire.*

“No.” She shuffled her feet. “She’s not real.”

“Of course she’s not.” He ruffled her hair. “Haven’t you been cooped up in the library with your boring old papa long enough? It’s a nice day outside. What do you say we go down to the kennels and see if Rose has had her pups yet?”

She beamed, taking his outstretched hand.

*I don’t need anything from you,* she thought at the voice that nudged the edges of her mind. *I like things as they are.*

The pups had begun to walk on stumpy little legs, crawling over Juliet where she sat cross-legged on the ground.

“Are they really Rose’s pups?” she asked her older sister, skeptical. “They don’t look like her.” Rose was a hunting dog, pointy and gangly with a wiry coat.

“All puppies look like this,” answered Lavinia with the superior knowledge of ten years. “And you shouldn’t sit on the ground, you’ll soil your dress.”

She shrugged. “It’s not my best dress.” A pup chewed on her fingers with needle-sharp teeth and she giggled. “Can I keep one, Vini?”

The older girl sniffed. “What for? A baby like you can’t take care of a hunting dog.”

“I can!” she said, outraged. “Papa’s dog is the same, and all he does is sleep.”

“Griffon sleeps all day because he’s a hundred years old, and lazy. Besides, why would Mama want a puppy underfoot when she has you?”

“I’m going to ask Papa,” Juliet resolved.

“And he’ll let you, because you’re his favourite.”

“Am not.”

“Yes you are, pumpkin. You’re Papa’s little baby.” Lavinia nudged a puppy with her foot, watching it tumble over in the dirt. “I don’t care - Mama likes me more.”

It seemed true. Juliet didn’t mind - one for each seemed fair. With four children, a parent could hardly be expected to like them all the same. Mama’s favourite was Michael, anyway, twelve years old and destined to be a Templar. And Papa’s real favourite must be Alec, because he was a boy and the oldest, and would be Bann some day. He couldn’t be Bann if he wasn’t the best child, she
reasoned, and at fifteen he was strong and brave and good with a sword. He was her favourite as well, but he was a squire somewhere near Wycome, miles and miles away.

“I like this one best,” she declared, looking at the little pinprick marks left on her hand.

Drakon grew into a lanky puppy with more enthusiasm than grace, constantly tripping over his own long legs. Vini teased her about his lack of coordination but she knew all the pups in the litter were the same at that age, tumbling and rolling over each other in the courtyard.

“He’s a fine dog,” said Michael on one of his visits from the Chantry. “Too good to be a little girl’s pet, at any rate.”

“He’s not a pet.” Her small hands clutched a piece of rope, Drakon tugging furiously at the other end. “He’ll hunt with the other dogs.”

“And the rest of the time he’ll sleep on your bed and take treats from your plate.” Michael laughed scornfully. “You’ll make him soft.”

“He’s not soft. He’s fierce.” The pup growled in assent, shaking the rope hard between his teeth.

“You shouldn’t let him play like that. He’ll turn vicious.”

“How can he be soft and vicious?” She didn’t care for Michael’s opinion - the kennel master said tug was a good game for a hunting dog, and Drakon could already release the rope right away if requested to do so.

“You don’t know anything,” her brother retorted, a clear sign he had lost the argument. “Wolfhounds are dumb, anyway. One day I’m going to have a Ferelden Mabari.”

“I didn’t know Templars could have dogs.”

“Well I will.”

“Stop talking about boring dogs,” Lavinia complained. “I thought you were going to walk us into the village. I need to buy ribbons.”

He rolled his eyes, but Juliet knew he was more than happy to stroll along the road to the village in his Templar apprentice uniform, basking in the admiration of the farm girls along the way. He puffed out his chest, the hero Templar protecting his younger sisters from danger. “Come on then, squirts.”

She sat on the floor in the library, Drakon’s shaggy head resting in her lap as she played with his
floppy ears.

“It’s true, Papa. He was going to run under a cart wheel, and then there was a shield all around him. A glowing shield.” Red-faced with shame, Michael glared at his little sister. “Everybody saw.”

The commotion had proven too much for Lavinia, whose sobbing had finally turned to hiccups. “Are we going to be arrested, Papa?”

“No, Vini, we won’t be arrested.” There was a tension in her father’s voice that belied his words. “Run along now to the kitchen. Cook will make you some hot milk.”

Nobody was offering her hot milk, Juliet noticed. As she noticed the way her father moved behind his desk when her siblings were gone, a barrier between them.

“It’s not the puppy’s fault, Papa.”

“I know, little pumpkin,” he said sadly. “Nobody will punish him, I promise.”

“But I’ll be punished, won’t I?”

When he met her gaze, she was alarmed to see tears in his eyes. Papa didn’t cry - he was the Bann, he was her Papa. Worse, he looked afraid.

“Are you scared of me, Papa?” Her voice trembled.

“It’s not a punishment, pumpkin.” He avoided her last question. “It’s to keep everybody safe. To keep you safe.”

“I’m safe.” Tears spilled from her eyes now, stupid baby tears that Drakon licked away with his warm tongue. “I promise, Papa, I’ll be safe. I won’t do it again.”

“It’s not up to me now.” He glanced away. “You’ll go and live somewhere else. With people like you.”

“If it was up to you, could I stay?”

“I’ll send your Mama in.” He stood shakily, seeming suddenly much older than he had been. “You won’t leave right away. But soon.” He reached to touch her hair, flinching away at the last second. “I’ll see you before you go.”

I can help you, Desire whispered. You can stay, if you just let me help you.

“Go away,” she mumbled. “This is all your fault. I hate you.”

She couldn’t be sure, but she thought the demon laughed. I’m all you have now, child. I’m the only one that loves you.

Drakon wriggled in her arms, desperately licking her face. “Liar,” she said, squeezing him until he whined in faint protest. “I don’t need you. I don’t need anybody.”
“Please,” she cried. “I'll be missed - somebody will come looking for me.”

Sounds of revelry drifted over the tall hedge, laughter and low chatter and the merry music of the orchestra.

“By the time they find you, you'll be virgin no longer.” His calloused fingers roamed beneath her skirts, over the top of silk stockings to caress the bare expanse of her creamy thighs.

“My maidenhead belongs to the Duke,” she protested weakly, and he laughed cruelly. It wasn't the foppish Duke she wanted, they both knew as much.

“Were it not for me, my lady, your maidenhead would belong to a half-dozen bandits on the road to Montsimmard.”

“You are my bodyguard.” His breath was warm against the slender column of her neck - oh, how she wished to feel his lips devour her alabaster skin! “This is not proper - “

“Proper?” He drew back and gripped her chin, his dark eyes flashing. “Since when do you care for what is proper, Marguerite? You have wanted this from the moment we met. Deny it, if it is not true.”

She could not. “Kiss me, Antoine,” she breathed. His sensuous lips curved in triumph. “As my lady wishes.”

As his mouth closed hungrily over her virginal rosebud lips, she felt the hard press of -

“What are you reading?”

“Oh!” Startled, Solona dropped the book. As she scrambled from the bench to retrieve it, Cullen’s gauntleted fingers closed over the slender volume.

“Here, let - “ His brows knit. “To Guard Her Heart.” Before she could protest, he had opened up the book and begun flipping through the flimsy pages. “What - oh. Oh Maker's breath.” He snapped it shut, face mottled pink.

“I found it,” she said. It was true - the book had fallen behind the cushions on the cosy bench where she liked to study - but she still felt ashamed.

“Well.” He attempted a smile, handing the book over gingerly as if it were unclean and possibly dangerous. “I didn't think it was an official part of the library.”

“Is it forbidden?” she asked shyly.

Cullen cleared his throat. “Well I'm not sure it's quite appropriate for a young lady…but I don't know of any rules against it.”
“It's just…” Solona dropped her head, blushing. “It's terribly written, and I'm not sure I'm interested in all those heaving bosoms and straining - anyway - it's just different. Dances, and dresses, and gardens…it's an escape, I suppose.”

“Escape?” His eyes narrowed at her choice of words.

“As close as I'll ever get to trying,” she assured him. Sensing a change of subject was in order, she settled back onto the cushions. “Have you ever heard an orchestra?”

“An orchestra? No, I don't think so. Minstrels, but not an orchestra.”

“Have you been to a ball?”

His laugh startled her. “No. No, that's not me. There were precious few balls in Honnleath.”

“Oh.” Solona traced the filigree writing on the cover, an innocuous blue leather. “That's not how people live, then. Outside.”

“Some do. Nobles.”

“You're not noble?”

“No.” Again she must have amused him with her naivety. “Common as dirt.”

“I'm sorry. You just seemed…” Embarrassed, she fell silent.

“Don't be sorry,” he said softly. “I've been called worse.”

“Cullen!” Their conversation had caught the attention of the templar’s sharp-eyed superior, who now gestured curtly to the boy.

“I - I must go,” he stammered. “Enjoy your reading. I mean - “

“Goodbye, Cullen.” She smiled gently. “I'll find something more appropriate to study.”

“Good. Do that.” Stiff-backed, he walked away, and with a sigh of regret she tucked the book away in her satchel.

The words Solona was copying began to swim together on the page, and she found her head drooping.

“You’re tired, child,” Irving observed from behind his desk.

“I'm fine.” She slapped her cheeks lightly. “I just have these last few pages to finish.”

“Off to bed with you,” he chided. “The books aren’t going anywhere. And neither are we.”

“No,” she agreed.

He must have caught something in her tone, for his shrewd old eyes narrowed. “Is that a hint of
bitterness, apprentice?"

"Bitterness? No." Regret, perhaps, for what might have been, but not bitterness. ‘I’m happy here.’

"Yes." Irving steepled his fingers, discomfited. “I should - your... closeness... with one of the templar recruits has been remarked upon.”

“Closeness?” she asked, incredulous. Of course it must be Cullen - he was the only one who would give her the time of day. ‘I’m civil to him, if that’s what you mean. And he to me.’

There was sorrow in the old man’s face. “Be careful, child. The boy is young. Even if you do not form an attachment, his feelings could compromise you both.”

“He doesn’t have feelings towards me.” She was roused to uncharacteristic insolence. “What do you suggest, that I should be unfriendly? Doesn’t that have the potential to get me in more trouble?”

“Peace, child.” The First Enchanter held out his hands in a gesture of appeasement. “It is a thin line we must walk, sometimes. I will fret for you less when you have passed your Harrowing - in the meantime, please indulge an old man and take care.”

The injustice stung. “All I’ve ever done is take care,” she replied, blinking against the prickling behind her eyes. “I don’t know what more I can do.”

Irving rose from his desk. “You have always been a sensible girl,” he said. “More so than some twice your age. And you have never given me cause to doubt you.” He gathered up a small stack of books. “I apologise if I spoke out of turn. Here, take these back to the library, and we’ll forget this conversation ever took place.”

Somewhat mollified, she watched as he wrote out a permission slip with shaky hands. “Write large,” she suggested. “Some of these templars have poor eyesight.”

“Now, now,” he said. “The templars are here for our protection, too. You can understand why some of them might be a trifle over-vigilant.”

Solona remembered the way the sweaty templar had clutched at her thighs, and suspected Irving’s own experience of templar vigilance might be somewhat different from her own. She sighed.

“Thank you, First Enchanter.” Tucking the note away, she was careful to let the end of the vellum protrude from her pouch.

Predictably at this time of night, the corridors were empty of mages. Somewhere in these halls a templar patrolled - most likely Cullen, this was his shift. Irving’s words came back to her and the angry flush returned to her cheeks.

She had nothing to be ashamed of. She hadn’t so much as initiated a conversation with him, certainly hadn’t done anything that could be construed as flirting! He was - what, a friend? Could a templar be a friend? She wouldn’t be so reckless as to risk both their futures on more, even if he
wanted to.

But if others could misconstrue her intentions, what about Cullen himself? What if, unknowingly, she had led him on? Was it safe to let him find her alone in the deserted corridor? If he seemed honourable when others were around, did that necessarily mean that he wouldn’t press his advantage on a mage who was smaller and weaker than himself, one who might accidentally have given him reason to think -

*Oh.*

She wasn’t alone. Approaching an alcove leading to a curving stairwell, she heard the muffled sound of voices. Then sighs, a hastily stifled gasp.

There was no other way to the library, not without changing floors twice and walking most of the way around the tower. Solona slipped into the shadows close to the wall, moving quietly - if she was quick, they’d never know she was there.

Her eyes flickered into the dark alcove - just to check she was unseen, she didn’t want to know what was going on back there. But the image was seared into her brain before she could look away - an impression of robes hiked up around waists, bare legs tangled, slender fingers wrapped around a swollen - oh, *Maker, look away.* Face burning, she hurried on.

The steady, unmistakable tread of boots approached from the direction of the library. Suddenly the wet noise of flesh meeting, the muted panting and moaning, seemed the loudest sounds in the world - he must hear it, he must, and they’d be punished. With a silent apology to the ancient texts in her arms, she tripped and let the books fall, skidding over the flagstones.

The rutting couple fell silent. The boots halted, then picked up pace...it was Cullen, rounding the curve in the corridor, his expression changing from worry to relief to concern.

“Are you alright?” He bent to help her retrieve the books, no easy task in his rigid suit of armour.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “I tripped, but I didn’t hurt myself. I’m more worried about the books.”

“I don’t think they’re harmed.” Smiling, he offered her a hand up, shaking his head when she would have taken the texts back. “It might be best if I carry these, don’t you think? These old floors can be uneven.”

“You’ll fall harder than I will,” she retorted.

“Ah, but I won’t fall.” He offered his arm, then thought better of it. “Heading for the library? I’ll walk with you.”

“That’s not - “ She remembered the tryst in the stairwell - if they had any sense, the lovers would have disentangled and hidden further up the stairs, but there was no point in taking the risk. “Thank you. I’d appreciate the company.”

“You would?” Cullen’s eyes lit up, and she cursed herself.

They walked in silence, the books sitting awkwardly in Cullen’s plated arms.

“So.” He cleared his throat. “You and - is it Jowan? - seem close.”

“Jowan?” She shrugged. “He’s a friend. We grew up together. He’s like…”
“A brother?”

“Brother.” The word was unfamiliar on her lips. “I suppose. I wouldn’t know.”

“You don’t have family?” Cullen stopped before the library, unsure how to open the door with his arms full of books.

“Let me.” Solona ducked under his elbow. “No family,” she confirmed as she pushed the heavy door open. “None that I know of.”

“I’m sorry.” He laid the books down on a table as gently as he could manage. “It must be hard.”

“Hard?” She thought about it. “I’m not alone. I share a room with what, twenty people?”

“Me too.” Cullen smiled. “It’s enough to make you wish you were alone, sometimes…”

An awkward silence fell. Solona snatched up a book, searching the shelves for its home. “Do you have family?”

“Yes. My parents. Two sisters, and a brother… I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“Do you miss them?”

Glancing back, she saw the struggle in his face, the unwillingness to admit to any weakness before a mage. Finally he answered, “Yes. We write, but it’s not the same - well, you know.”

“I don’t,” she admitted with a smile. “But I have a good imagination.”

“Of course,” he said, and again, “I’m sorry.”

“That’s life.” The last book shelved, she dusted off her hands and turned to face him. “No family, no possessions, no connections. Those are the rules.”

“Yes.” Cullen straightened, falling back into the templar pose. Feet apart, hands behind his back. “If you’re done here, apprentice, I’ll see you to the dormitory.”

Looking into his amber eyes, Solona nodded brusquely. Distance…distance was for the best. “Yes. We’re done here.”
Lake Calenhad, 9:30 Dragon Age

Cullen couldn’t help but wonder if Solona would have enjoyed the hustle and bustle of the docks on market day. It was a festive affair, bright awnings set up over the stalls and ribbons fluttering in the light breeze. The Spoiled Princess had taken advantage of the sunshine to set up tables outside, and even the serving girls wore smiles - under the watchful gaze of their wives, the local farmholders were less handsy than usual.

The crowd was somewhat overwhelming even to Cullen, after the quiet of the Tower. A running child collided with his leg and was quickly shepherded away by her mother, muttering apologies.

“Why is she nervous?” he wondered aloud. Could the child be a mage? He watched them suspiciously until the blended into the crowd.

“Maker, Cullen, it’s a day off!” Gerrett clapped him heartily on the back, sending ale sloshing over the side of his mug. “Stop looking for apostates! As if you need more little mage girls to fret over.”

“Little - “ The child and her mother forgotten, Cullen glared at his templar brother. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing at all, recruit. Nothing at all.”

Across the lake, the Tower loomed stark on the horizon. Every now and then he would catch a market-goer glancing in its direction, making a quick sign to ward off evil. The inn staff, accustomed to living in its shadow, barely spared it a thought. To Cullen, arriving a year ago fresh from a secluded refuge in the West, it had seemed the most imposing building in Thedas - now he knew the relative banality of life in Kinloch Hold, it was merely his home.

“I’d like to get out of sight of that thing once in a while,” Gerrett griped. “Have a few days off, or a week. Enough to visit home. Or travel to Denerim! I’ve never seen the capital.”

“Nor I,” Cullen said absently. Home would be good. He’d missed Mia’s wedding, she’d written herself to tell him as much - Branson would be nearly a man grown, and Rosalie far from the fat-cheeked child he’d left behind in Honnleath. His parents, too, weren’t getting any younger.

“I’m for food.” His fellow templar drained the last of his ale and patted his belly. “Proper market food - something fried in oil and stuck on a skewer. Are you coming?”

“In a moment.” Cullen nodded at a dwarf beneath a green and gold awning. “I’m going to look at books.”

“Books!” Gerrett rolled his eyes. “You spend half your life standing in a library, what d’you need
more books for?”

“Arcane technique makes for dry reading.”

“Well don’t be too long. If we miss the late boat, Kester won’t be back until nightfall and we’ll have no choice but to drink ale all afternoon.”

“You’d hate that, I’m sure.” Cullen tossed him a copper. “Here, get me something on a skewer as well. If it’s meat, make sure you can tell what kind - I don’t have a taste for rat.”

“Picky,” his friend groused, but he grinned before sauntering off.

The dwarven bookseller looked him up and down with a practised eye. “Templar, eh?” He gestured to a stack of thick books. “Got martial history here. Chantry texts. Or…” he winked. “Got a drawer full of dirty etchings. Ladies, men, all sorts.”

“No, no thankyou,” Cullen stammered. “I’ll just...I’ll browse, if that’s alright.”

“Suit yourself.” The dwarf shrugged. “Let me know if you change your mind. Got some new from Rivain - saucy sorceresses, if you catch my drift - “

“Thankyou,” he said stiffly. “If I need any help, I’ll certainly let you know.”

He had assembled a small pile of history volumes when a title caught his eye, bound in scarlet leather. *The Rose of Orlais.* Curious, he picked it up and flicked through the pages.

*With an animalistic growl, Garren seized the front of her bodice and ripped, her alabaster breasts spilling free into his eager hands. Talia’s outraged gasp changed to a moan of pleasure as his lips closed over -*

“Maker’s breath,” he muttered. It couldn’t all be like that, could it? Guiltily he flipped the pages forward, a different passage catching his attention.

*Talia lay back on the satin pillows, her raven locks surrounding her like a cloud.  
“Let me sheathe your sword, my noble chevalier,” she whispered huskily.  
*Her crimson lips parted as he invaded her inner sanctum -*

He snapped the book shut with a squeak, finding the dwarf regarding him with a raised eyebrow. “Did you want to buy that, young Ser, or are you happy just to read the whole thing here?”

Cullen shoved the book into the middle of his pile. “How much?” he asked, blushing. “It’s, er, for a young lady. My - my sister.”

“Fine.” He all but threw the coins at the dwarf, aware that he was expected to barter but wishing to do nothing but disappear and hide the offending book in the deepest recesses of his pocket.

“A pleasure, ser.” The bookseller offered an irreverent half-bow. “I do hope your sister enjoys the gift.”

He found her in the gardens, the last of the afternoon sun illuminating hints of copper in her brown hair. On her knees in the dirt, she seemed to have filled half a basket with various grasses and flowers.

“Cullen!” She looked up in surprise, pushing strands of hair back from her face with her wrist. “I almost didn’t recognise you, without all the - metal.”

“You look a little unusual yourself.” Black dirt stained her fingers and the knees of her robe, leaves and twigs having somehow found their way into her braid.

“I’m gathering herbs.” She pointed to a reddish flower with spiky leaves. “Is that embrium, do you know?”

“That’s a weed.”

“Oh. A good weed?”

“Just a weed. Here.” He crouched next to her. “These are elfroot.” A pile of leafy green plants, pulled up by the roots and discarded. “These in the basket are...grass, grass...dandelions, if I’m not mistaken. Spindleweed, you can use that. Rashvine. Ivy - I’m not sure that has any purpose, but I could be wrong?”

“No.” Solona pulled a face. “I’m not meant to collect ivy.”

“I think embrium might only grow in the glass house.” Cullen helped the crestfallen mage to her feet. “Couldn’t the tranquil do this?”

He saw her small flinch at his careless use of the word tranquil, then her smile returned. “They could, and they might do a better job of it. But then I wouldn’t have an excuse to be down here in the sunshine, would I?”

This made Cullen unaccountably sad, despite the carefree way in which she said it. His eyes fell to her forearms, the sleeves of her robes pushed up almost to her elbows. “You’re burnt!”

“Burnt?” Solona inspected the reddened skin in wonder. “Did the sun do that?”

“That, and your nose.” A tiny scatter of freckles had already appeared beneath the pink. “You should wear a hat, if you’re going to make a habit of this.”

“I doubt they’ll send me again when they see what’s in my basket.” She touched the skin of her arm again, marvelling at the heat that radiated from it. “Do you mind if...?”

“If what?”
“I just wanted to cool it down, but...magic would be quickest.”

“Oh.” Cullen hesitated. An apprentice shouldn’t use magic unsupervised...but he was a templar, wasn’t he? Off-duty, but a templar nonetheless, and she had asked permission. “Go ahead,” he said with more surety than he felt.

Fascinated, he watched a cool glow form beneath her fingers, the angry redness drawn out of the skin until her pale complexion was restored.

“That’s useful!” he remarked, impressed.

“We can be useful.” Solona’s mouth twisted, not quite a smile. “It’s why they let us live.”

“I didn’t…”

“I know, I know.” She bent, shaking loose dirt off the discarded elfroot before placing it in her basket. She glanced at his tunic, recognisably templar attire but not his usual armour. “Is it your day off?”

“Yes. I’ve been over the lake to the markets. Which reminds me…” Embarrassed, he hesitated, but now she was waiting curiously for him to finish the sentence. “I got you something.” Digging deep in his tunic, he retrieved the scarlet-bound volume.

Solona hesitated, staring at the gift.

“It’s a book.”

“So I see.”

“I haven’t read it,” he said hastily. “But I think it’s like your other book...it has balls, and things. Dances, I mean. Orlesian stuff.”

She wiped her hand on her already filthy robe before taking the book gingerly between thumb and finger. “You didn’t have to get me anything, Cullen.”

“I didn’t,” he said quickly. “I was buying books for myself, and this...came with them. It’s not the sort of thing I’d read. Not that I’ve read it. Don’t even know what it’s about, in fact.”


“Well that or it’s a botanical book. That’s something you might find useful.”

Solona laughed, shaking her head. “Thank you, Cullen. Nobody’s ever given me anything - not to keep.”

“I won’t make a habit of it, I promise.” He glanced at her sad collection of herbs. “Here, let me show you where the glass house is and I’ll help you sort the healing plants from the poisons.”

He'd been present at many Harrowings now, but they still made his guts grip and his palms sweat.
For every few that went smoothly there was one that ended in varying degrees of trauma. He’d seen three mages awaken with cloudy eyes, snarling and hissing before they were dispatched by the waiting templars. One of those had panicked and botched the strike, two templars ending up frantically hacking at the possessed girl until she lay dead in a mess of blood. Once a young templar tasked with the killing blow had broken when the ritual went too long, on the verge of running the boy through before Greagoir had ordered him to stop and wait. Minutes later the mage had awoken, clear-eyed and human. One girl had simply gone into the Fade and never woken up - a weak heart, Greagoir said. Unforeseeable.

Then there were the Harrowings that never happened - once they went as far as assembling in the chamber, only for the mage to collapse on the threshold, begging to be made tranquil instead. One apprentice, a quiet elven girl, had been found hanging from a knotted bedsheets rather than face either outcome.

These were the Harrowings Cullen thought of when he was summoned to the chamber at the top of the tower, his armour and sword polished to a fine gleam. A sign of respect, Greagoir told them in no uncertain terms - if these mages were to face the possibility of death, the least they could do was make an effort to uphold the dignity of their station.

The Knight-Commander paced before them now, finally coming to a halt. “Cullen.”

His stomach sank, but he kept his spine straight and his eyes to the front. “Yes, ser.”

The first few times, Greagoir would have asked him to recite the signs of demonic possession. The protocol for a Harrowing that went overtime, or how to proceed if the signs seemed ambiguous. Now he just nodded his head, satisfied.

Once, Cullen had struck the killing blow - the first and only time he had ever killed a man. Not a man, he reminded himself. An abomination. When that moment came, the mage was already dead and his sword was like the sword of mercy, bringing the end with a final, clean thrust through the heart. Physically, it hadn’t felt very different to a training dummy.

“Bring in the mage,” the Knight-Commander called.

Feet apart. Arms behind your back, wrists crossed. Not on your sword pommel, there would be time for that if needed. Don’t frighten the mages more than necessary. Breathe.

The chamber doors opened and his stomach dropped.

Was he unfit to be a templar?

He’d stayed silent when he recognised her. Hadn’t broken formation, even when she fell to the ground unconscious. If she hadn't come through it so quickly, perhaps his resolve would have faltered. Like the young templar but instead of running at her with a sword he would have run to her side, shaking her until she woke up.

Because this was wrong, he realised as he watched her crumpled on the stone floor, her eyelids twitching. To use mages as bait, to send them alone and defenceless against a demon - all those
failed Harrowings, those rites of Tranquillity, and why? What did it prove, in the end?

Then she'd stirred, sooner than anyone expected and his hand had fallen to the pommel of his sword because she had failed, she must have failed and everything was lost, for nothing. Until her eyes opened and they were hers, the blue-grey of a storm in summer.

Cullen turned over on the narrow bunk. What time was it? The harder he tried to get to sleep, the more it evaded him.

Then she'd found him in the corridor, and even after like a fool he'd admitted that he'd been ready to kill her just hours earlier, she'd asked him if he wanted to talk somewhere in private. And like a bigger fool, he'd panicked and stammered and told her it would be inappropriate.

To the void with it all, it was inappropriate. And dangerous, and irresponsible, and all he could think about. Lips parting, and breasts spilling free - damn that filthy book, he never should have opened it!

*Perhaps she just wanted to talk. Did you think of that?*

But there was a line of thought even more dangerous, for it led to more thoughts like *What's the harm? and Perhaps you should find out? and What would she do if you kissed her?*

Enough! Next time he saw her he should find out what she wanted. She trusted him enough to ask, and trust was important in a mage-templar relationship. Not relationship, that wasn't the right word...association. There would be no kissing. Not unless she wanted to.

Groaning, Cullen buried his face in the pillow.

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There was an odd atmosphere the next morning. Cullen caught more than one of his fellow templars looking at him strangely, and wondered for a moment if the lack of sleep had changed his appearance somehow. Was it his hair? The curls could be unruly first thing in the morning, but surely everyone was used to it by now.

“I don't suppose you've heard.” Gerrett drew him aside. “Amell has joined the Wardens. She left last night.”

“The...the Wardens? You mean the Grey Wardens?”

“What other Wardens are there, Cullen? That Duncan conscripted her. Greagoir is furious.”

“But what…” None of this was coming together in a way that made sense. “Why is he furious?”

“Because she helped a maleficar destroy his phylactery and escape,” his friend said as if he were somehow simple for not knowing. “She should be on her way to the Aeonar now, not Ostagar.”

Cullen’s head was swimming. “If this is your idea of a joke…” he growled.

“I'm sorry, Cullen.” Gerrett placed a hand on his shoulder, not without sympathy. “Mages. You just can't trust them.”
“You look well, little sister.”

Juliet wasn't sure if she felt well - the carriage ride from the Circle had left her tired and queasy, and nerves had made her unable to stomach breakfast.

_This is your home_, she told herself sternly. _Your family. Why should you be nervous?_

Lavinia, on the other hand, looked very well, radiant and smug with pregnancy.

“I'm glad you could visit for Alec’s wedding. It would have been nice to see you at mine…”

“I couldn't leave the Circle yet last year,” Juliet explained. “I hadn't passed my Harrowing.”

“I don't know what that even means,” her sister pouted, “but it was very disappointing. My dress came from Val Royeaux, you know! Lady Darrow said I was the prettiest bride Ostwick had seen since the Blessed Age.”

“I'm sorry I missed it.” She couldn't remember the last time she had felt this out of place - her robe was so drab compared to Lavinia’s lavish dress, the sitting room furnishings, even the livery of the servants.

“Well never mind that now. What are you wearing?”

“This?” She smoothed the plain fabric over her knees. “It's my robe, we all wear them.”

“Not that, silly thing - what are you wearing to the wedding?”

“Lavinia!” Their mother broke out of her apparent trance, her porcelain cup clattering against its saucer. “You know she won't be at the wedding!”

“I don't know any such thing, Mama! Why is she here, if not to go to the wedding?”

“To see her brother and sister, of course.” Clara glanced at her and quickly away. “Isn't it lovely to have her visit?”

_And my parents? I'm right here, Mama. You can speak to me instead of around me._

“Where's Papa?” she asked.

Lavinia shrugged. “He was around this morning.”

“You're father is busy. He'll see you when he can.”

“There's no hurry.” Juliet looked down into her untouched cup of tea. “It's only been ten years.”

“We wrote!” Her mother's lips thinned, her voice shaking. “I don't have to listen to this. I'll speak with you when you've calmed down.” She placed her cup down delicately and stalked out of the room, leaving Lavinia wide-eyed.
“Maker's breath!” she swore. “I haven't seen her like that since - well. Not in a long time, at any rate. Anyway!” She leaned in conspiratorially. “Tell me about life in your Circle. Is it true the Bann of Inveresk’s son lives there too?”

“Willard? He arrived a few years after me.”

“That's funny. You know, the two of you might have been betrothed one day if you weren't - you know.”

Juliet sighed. “You can say ‘mage’, Vini. It's not a bad word.”

“Not where you're from, maybe.” She giggled. “What's he like?”

**Handsome. Funny. Cruel.**

“He's nice enough.”

“Nobody's called me Vini in years! It's so good to have my little sister back, even if you are a mage.” The last word was whispered, with a guilty sideways glance at the waiting servants.

Juliet smiled. “It's good to be back,” she lied.

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It was her room and yet not. The view was the same, over the gardens. The wallpaper, even the bed, she thought, although the linens weren't familiar. Every trace of her had been removed - the dolls, the dresses in the wardrobe, the little rocking chair in the corner.

And why not? That little girl was long gone. This was a perfectly serviceable guest room, and she no more - perhaps even less - than a guest in this house.

**Willard.** Those dark, laughing eyes, the ready smile, the way he'd singled her out for attention. In another world they might have been married, he'd said as much in his efforts to get inside her robes, and somehow it had worked. A fumbling, unsatisfactory tryst in a dark corner and within the week she'd seen him courting another girl.

*I meant everything I said. We had fun, but it's not like we're going to be sweethearts…we're mages, Juliet. That's not for us.*

The heartbreak had faded quicker than the blow to her pride. What hurt most, though, wasn't the casual way he'd discarded her, but the truth of what he'd said. Something she'd taken as fact until a Bann's son with dark eyes had turned her head with thoughts of what might have been.

Well she could play at that game too. There were plenty of young men in the Circle who admired her, and plenty of dark corners and idle moments in which mages might indulge themselves…if she couldn't have the life she'd been born into, she'd take advantage of the only freedom she'd been given - the freedom to misbehave.

There was a furtive knock at the door, and without waiting for an answer Lavinia poked her head in.
“I brought you some proper clothes. From my old wardrobe, so they might not be quite the thing now but they'll be better than…whatever that is you're wearing. And this!” She unfurled a finely embroidered silver-and-blue dress.

“What's that for?” asked Juliet.

Lavinia rolled her eyes. “For the wedding, of course.”

“But I'm not going to the wedding.”

“Nonsense.” Her sister held the fabric up against her with a critical eye. “Yes, this should suit you well. You won't be able to attend the ceremony, of course, but dress you up enough and hide you in the gardens somewhere and Mama never need know you were there.”

“Hide me in the gardens?” she said skeptically. “Like an ornament?”

“Don't be silly. Everyone knows the best bit of a party happens in the garden. Now, I'm going to send my maid to do your hair after mine - such thick hair!” Lavinia exclaimed with envy. “And your face, must do something about those freckles. Then while everyone is away watching the boring part - “

“The marriage?”

“That's what I said - you'll go down to the gardens and wait for the party to begin.”

“By myself?”

“Not for long, in this dress.”

That was how Juliet found herself in a tastefully low-cut dress, her hair elegantly twisted and pinned, loitering amongst the topiary and orange trees of her parents’ summer garden.

She was a little light-headed, having missed breakfast again after the awkwardness of last night's dinner. Mama had spoken around her and Papa seemed reluctant to so much as glance in her direction after his first stilted greeting. Her brother Alec had been courteous enough and Vini’s young husband surprisingly charming, but still she couldn't shake the feeling that her presence was the reason for everyone's discomfort.

Alec had taken a moment to come and see her before he left to be married. “Sorry you couldn't come, Jules. You know Mama.”

“Not really,” she'd answered impulsively and he'd given her an awkward half-hug, muttered something that might have been, “It's not your fault.”

She hoped his bride was nice. A younger cousin of the Margrave of Ansburg, Lavinia said - a touch plain for Alec in her sister's estimation, but he seemed to like her well enough. She'd meet her eventually…perhaps tomorrow, when things had quietened down and she didn't have to be hidden away any longer.
The daylight was beginning to fade when she heard the first strains of music drifting from the windows, then the doors opened and people began to spill onto the lawn. From behind a statue Juliet watched them, richly-dressed lords and ladies mingling on the manicured grass as servants weaved between them with trays of long-stemmed glasses.

“Juliet?”

Startled, she turned towards the speaker. “Do I know you?”

“No.” He was her own age, dark-haired with sharp green eyes. “But Lavinia told me to bring you this.” He held out a glass of wine, bubbly and straw-coloured, and after a moment’s hesitation she took it.

“You know my name.” The bubbles floated up her nose on the first sip, making her blink. “What's yours?”

“Simon de Hugues,” he said with a bow.

“Orlesian?”

“From Wycome, actually, but yes. My father's family was from Orlais. My mother is the bride's aunt.”

“And you know Lavinia?” They only ever had watered-down wine in the Circle - already the drink was going to her head.

“Everyone knows Lavinia.” Simon’s eyes crinkled when he smiled. “How about you? You have the look of a Trevelyian.”

He didn't know, then. “I'm a cousin. Distant. From far away.” She drained her glass. “Why, what did Lavinia tell you about me?”

“Only your name, and that you're shy.” He leaned against the statue, appraising her. “But you don't seem shy.”

Guests had begun to disperse through the gardens, some of them glancing curiously at the girl in the blue dress as they passed. Juliet remembered suddenly that she had barely eaten all day, perhaps the reason a single drink was having such an effect on her.

“Is there anything to eat up there, Simon?” she asked.

“You could come up with me and find out,” he said hopefully, but she shook her head.

“I can't. Shy, remember?”

He hesitated. “Will you wait here?”

“No,” she answered, and Simon looked crestfallen for a moment before she nodded to an ivy-covered pergola farther down the garden. “I'll wait there.”

He returned with a plate piled high with food and a bottle hidden inside his coat, and they had a picnic of sorts sitting side-by-side on a stone bench, hidden from view of the party up the hill.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Seventeen. And you?”
“Sixteen.”

“Are you going to tell me why you're really hiding down here?”

“Probably not.” Juliet leaned forward, aware of how his eyes were drawn to the tops of her breasts. “Unless you ask very nicely.”

His tongue darted out to wet his lips. “Please?”

“I'm not supposed to be here.” She shuffled closer under the pretext of reaching for the wine bottle, and refilled her glass.

“I could have done that for you.”

“I like to do things for myself.”

“So why aren't you supposed to be here?”

“Because they're ashamed of me.”

“Of you?” His eyes travelled over her face. “What could they possibly be ashamed of?”

“I'm a bastard,” she lied. “Are you very shocked?”

“Shocked?” he laughed. “Hardly! I don't see why it should matter at all - “

She placed her glass aside and kissed him.

A moment’s hesitation, then he was returning the kiss with surprising skill, his hands encircling her waist.

Was this what her sister had planned, when she sent him to find her? She found she didn't care. Here in the arms of a stranger she was finally wanted.

“You're beautiful,” he broke free to gasp and she hushed him.

“I don't need that.”

“It's true,” he protested but he was silent then, letting her guide him to what she did need. His hands roaming her thighs under the full skirts of her dress, his mouth trailing kisses along her bare shoulders and neck.

“I'm not sure we should…”

“We should,” she said decisively, placing his hand on the curve of her breast.

“Juliet,” he whispered. “Please don't tease me.”

“Does it have to be teasing?” Lifting her skirts she climbed into his lap, kissing him more urgently. “It's nothing I haven't done before. Why, are you…?”

“No,” he gasped. “But not like this. And not with a noble lady - “

“I'm neither of those things.”

“But you are.” Simon seized her wrists and gently, reluctantly, he disentangled himself. “I'm sorry. It's not that I don't want to.”
Just her luck - it seemed she could only find a boy who respected her when it was the opposite of what she wanted. Separated from his warmth, she shivered.

“Are you cold?” he asked, already shrugging off his jacket.

“A little,” she admitted.

“Here.” He draped it around her and she snuggled into its warmth. “I didn't think I'd meet someone like you here.”

“Like me?”

“You're more real than any of the girls I know.” He brushed a stray tendril of hair back from her face, and she leaned into his touch.

“We've spoken half a dozen words,” she reminded him gently. “The only real thing you know is my name, and I didn't even tell you that.”

“I don't care. There's something different about you.”

“Yes. It's my willingness to let you put your hand up my skirts.”

“No,” he protested. “Don't do that. Don't make it seem like less than it is.”

“It's nothing, Simon,” she insisted. “This, now, this is all we have.”

“Who is your father? I could court you - I could ask to see you again - “

“Court a bastard? I don't think so.” Uncomfortable with the intensity of his gaze, she stood and straightened her dress. “Enough of that talk. Will you walk with me?”

Gracious in defeat, Simon smiled. “Why not a dance? We can hear the music well enough from here.”

“I don't know this dance,” she admitted.

“You don’t?” He seemed surprised, and she kicked herself, realising she'd given too much away. She may as well stick to the truth. “I don't know any dances.”

“A Trevelyan who doesn't know how to dance? You are a rare creature.” He held out his hand. “Come on then, I'll teach you.”

Full dark fell over the estate as he led her, stumbling and giggling, through the steps of each dance. Light spilled from every window of the house and strings of lanterns from Nevarra illuminated the gardens, lit by servants with long tapers.

“You're a quick study.” His hand was warm on her waist. “I think you must be a Trevelyan after all. Juliet?” She had frozen, staring in the direction of the house. “What's wrong?”

“Someone's coming.”

“Mama!” a voice called. “Mama, wait! Calm down!”

“Don't tell me to be calm!”
“Fuck.” Juliet glanced around, a trapped animal searching for cover. “Oh please, Mama, no.”

“Mama?” Simon said, confused.

“Juliet!” Her mother descended on them in a flurry of skirts, Lavinia scurrying in her wake. “Get inside, now!” Her furious gaze fell on Simon. “Lord de Hugues? I apologise, but I must insist you leave us.”

“Juliet?”

“Please, Simon.” She couldn't meet his eye. “Go.”

“You weren't in your room,” Clara continued, unable to contain her anger a second longer. “And this! This is your dress, Lavinia! Is this your doing?”

“Mama, it's harmless. It's one night, nobody even knows she's here - “

“And drinking! How could you allow her to drink?”

“Don't be silly, Mama, she's older than I was when - “

“Never mind how old she is, stupid girl! Who knows what might happen? She's a mage!”

A cold feeling settled in the pit of Juliet's stomach. She was aware of Simon staring at her. What would she see in his face - anger, confusion, pity? Fear, like her father? She didn't want to know.

“Goodnight, Lord Hugues.” She curtsied deeply. “I'm afraid I must go now.”

“Mama, please,” Lavinia pleaded. “Juliet, wait…” Hurrying after her sister, she clutched at her sleeve. “Juliet,” she said apologetically, “his coat.”

“Oh.” Hands shaking, she wriggled out of the too-long sleeves. “Will you give it back to him, please?”

“You could…”

“No. I can't.”

Curious guests glanced in her direction as she made her way back to the house, Clara marching silently a few steps behind. It wasn't until they were safely upstairs that her mother spoke again, her voice trembling on the verge of tears.

“How could you ruin your brother's wedding like this?”

“Ruin?” she said, incredulous. “It seems to me everyone is still having a good time down there.”

“Don't you make a joke of this. You've no idea the scandal you might have caused.”

“I wasn't the one making a scene!”

“It's a privilege to be here. You're in our care, you can't just wander wherever you like - “

“I didn't go anywhere, I never left the grounds!”

“You were to stay in your room.”

“Clara.” Bann Trevelyan ascended the stairs. “People can hear you.”
“Maker forbid,” Juliet muttered.

“Mama, there's no need for this.” Lavinia peered anxiously from behind her father. “It was my idea.”

Clara wasn't to be distracted. “You can't help but cause problems, can you? After the trouble we went to to bring you here - “

“Why did you bring me here?”

“What did you say to me?”

“Why?” Juliet persisted. “You don't talk to me, you barely look at me, you don't want me leaving my room - what am I even here for?”

“It's your brother's wedding!”

“And you don't want me here!”

“No, I don't!” her mother shouted. “You don't know what you've done to this family. It's your fault Lavinia had to marry some merchant, not the Teyrn’s son - “

“Mama! Edwin and I are perfectly happy - “

“And it's your fault Michael had to transfer to Kirkwall instead of being stationed at the Ostwick Circle. He has to work twice as hard as anyone, because of what you are. He should have been here today, not you! You've torn this family apart, destroyed your father…”

“That's enough, Clara.” The Bann took his wife by the arm. “We have guests downstairs - they'll be wondering where you've gone.”

“Look at her, George! She's not even sorry.”

“Go on, Clara.” With a final glare for Juliet she made her way back to the party, and he turned to their eldest daughter. “You too, Lavinia.”

“I'm sorry,” Lavinia said. “I didn't mean to get you into trouble. I didn't know she felt that way, not like that…”

“It's fine, Vini.” Juliet smiled weakly. “It was fun while it lasted. Thank you for the dress.”

Her father was the last one remaining. He looked at her then, finally looked at her.

“You've grown, haven't you?”

She shrugged. “It's been ten years, Papa. Of course I've grown.”

“Do they treat you well?”

“They do. It's not a bad place.”

“Juliet…”

“I'm going to bed now.” The borrowed slippers were beginning to pinch her feet, and she suddenly felt more tired than she could ever remember being. “You should get back to your guests.”
“We could talk tomorrow, if…?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you needed the carriage tomorrow.” She turned towards her room, already pulling the pins free from her hair. “I think I’d like to go home.”
“Those are eight silver,” the quartermaster said, and after a moment’s confusion Solona handed over the single gold coin Duncan had given her.

“That’s worth more than a silver, isn’t it?”

The man grinned, taking in her travel-stained Circle robes. “It is indeed, young lady. Here’s your change.”

“Wait a minute!”

Solona flinched at Alistair’s angry tone before he appeared at her elbow, arms crossed over his chest and a frown on his handsome face.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “Duncan told me to buy some new boots - are these wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong with the boots.” The junior warden glared at the quartermaster. “How much coin did you give him?”

“Eight silver.”

“No, how much did you give him?”

“One of the gold - “ What were they called again? “Coins.”

“And you gave her two silver in return.”

The quartermaster scowled. “Two silver to begin with. I’m still counting out the rest.” He reached for a chest beneath his trestle table, neat bags of coins nestled within.

“Do you know what a sovereign is worth, Solona?” Alistair asked, his tone kinder for her. “The gold ones.”

“Not exactly, no,” she admitted, and he sighed.

“One sovereign is worth a hundred silvers. So if these boots are eight silver, you should get back…?”

“Ninety-two silvers. I’m not a simpleton, Alistair, I just didn’t know…”

“Now you do.”

He waited impatiently for the quartermaster to finish counting out the rest of her change.

“It’s a lot of coin for the young lady to carry,” the man said hopefully. “Are you sure there’s nothing else she needs to buy?”

“Not from you.” The humiliating transaction finalised, Alistair took her gently by the elbow. “I can see I’ll have to keep an eye on you. Now, let’s get you some decent clothes.”
“Wasn’t that the place to buy clothes?”

“Armour, perhaps. You did the right thing getting boots there, whatever we have will be too small, but the wardens must have some decent robes lying about. Dress as one of us and you’ll be less likely to be taken for a fool.”

He sensed her bristle at the implied insult and stopped still, at once apologetic.

“Look, I’m sorry. You can’t be expected to know how everything works all at once, given where you’ve come from. Duncan must be distracted, to have turned you loose with no more instruction than ‘buy boots!’”

“He told me to find you,” she said, “and I did. But I didn’t think I should bother you with something like that.”

“It’s no bother,” Alistair replied, his ready smile reappearing. “At least, it’s less bother to know you need help in the first place than to have to run around rescuing you from unscrupulous merchants.” He looked her up and down. “Now, that robe won’t do. A mage can stop a blow if she sees it coming, but a surprise arrow will tear straight through that. Not to mention it will get caught on every root and branch in the wilds - you’d be marching around in your smallclothes by nightfall! I mean - “ Blushing, he cleared his throat. “Let’s get you kitted out, before we find Duncan.”

A trunk of odds and ends in the warden camp yielded a serviceable pair of leggings and a lightly padded undertunic, its bulk serving to make the borrowed man's surcoat look less huge on her slight frame.

“Here,” Alistair said, passing her an embossed leather chestpiece. “It won’t stop an axe, but it could be the difference between an arrow piercing your lung or not. It’s not really built for - ahem - “

“Women?”

“Exactly!” he said, visibly relieved at avoiding any mention of breasts. “But it will do for now. And by the time the Joining’s done your new gear might be ready.”

“Thank you.” Solona clutched the mismatched items to her chest. “Now if you could…not keep an eye on me, for a moment?”

Alistair stared at her in confusion before blushing. “I’ll be outside the tent,” he said. “If you need any help, uh…just try to get most of it on first.”

“Shame about your dress, but I like the leggings.” Daveth ran his eyes shamelessly over her new ensemble. “You and Alistair seem to be getting friendly.”

Solona jerked the surcoat down to cover her knees. “What do you mean, friendly?”

“I mean I saw you both go into that tent before.” He leered. “Playing a little mage-templar game, were we? Bringing in the naughty apostate for questioning ?”
“I’m not an apostate,” she snapped. “And he’s not a templar.”

“Oh, he’s not?” Daveth’s eyebrows went up. “My mistake.”

This was a waste of time - Duncan was waiting on them, and she was trapped in a tent alley by a lecherous fool. She pushed past him, ignoring when he called out after her.

“You didn't say you're not naughty!”

So here they were. A nearly-templar warden and a nearly-warden mage, a cutpurse and a knight, out in the Wilds with dark fast approaching.

“We should make camp,” Alistair decided.

“Here?” Jory’s eyes darted around in his soft face. “It's practically a swamp! And the darkspawn could ambush us at any moment!”

“It's only going to get damper from here,” the warden sensibly pointed out. “And...spawnier.”

“Afraid of a few darkspawn, Ser Knight? Best run on back to Highever.” Daveth leered at Solona. “So, our first night together. About time, eh? Lucky you, out here with all the boys.”

“I am a married man!” Jory protested and the rogue laughed.

“All the more for the rest of us. You sharing a tent with me then, sweetheart? I could show you a thing or two they don't teach you in that Circle. Clever fingers, y’know.”

“Enough.” Alistair glared at him, his jaw clenched. “How about you put those clever fingers to work in building a fire, then you can put up the tent you'll be sharing with Jory.”

Daveth scowled. “I bloody knew it,” he muttered for Solona’s ears only. “Templars and mages. Can’t keep their bloody hands off ‘em. Let me know when he gets tired of you - I don’t mind another man’s seconds.”

She ignored him and he trudged off to find some relatively dry kindling. Jory sat to sharpen his sword, still glancing nervously towards the forest.

“Won't a fire draw darkspawn?” he asked.

Alistair shrugged. “It might. But then we'll get what we came for. Take first watch, if you're worried.”

Solona was unfolding a mysterious bundle of canvas and poles that was somehow meant to provide them shelter for the night. Alistair crouched next to her, helping to unfurl the tent.

“Is Daveth bothering you?” he asked quietly.

“That depends. Am I allowed to electrocute him?”
He laughed - not such a templar after all, then. “Just a little. Not enough to kill unless you really have to.”

“Then no,” she answered. “He’s not bothering me.”

They hesitated when it came time for bed. The tents were built to accommodate two, but not with much space for modesty. Solona was used to dressing and undressing in the presence of men - the Circle dormitories weren’t, after all, separated by gender - but Alistair’s discomfort was palpable.

“I’ll go in first,” she offered. “And you can come in when I’m in my bedroll. I won’t look.”

Even this was enough to send a pink flush over the junior warden’s cheeks. “I could sleep in the other direction, if you’d rather.”

“I’d rather not have your feet in my face.” She had already taken off her chestpiece and was kneeling to unlace her boots. “But thanks for offering.”

“Right then.” Realising he was watching her undress, Alistair turned away. “Call out when you’re ready.” Across the campfire she heard Daveth’s guffaw.

“I could let you know when she's - “

“Shut up, Daveth. You're on second watch.”

Solona made sure the cutpurse saw her smile before she ducked inside the tent. Let him think they were up to something in here - the thought of him sitting up frustrated, torn between listening for danger and straining his ears for the sounds of wanton pleasure, tickled her more than it should.

“You can come in now.” She tuck the blankets up to her chin and rolled to the side, eyes fixed on the water-stained canvas. Alistair entered silently and she heard him fumbling with his splintmail armour.

If this were The Rose of Orlais she’d turn to him now and let the blanket slip down to her waist, and he’d cage her with his hard, muscled body, his eyes - what colour were they? - burning with desire…

But this wasn’t a book, and romance took place in four-poster beds, whatever those were, atop silk sheets. Not in a musty tent beneath scratchy blankets with the smell of damp socks permeating the air. She didn't want Alistair - didn't want anything except to survive this, and the battle, and whatever nonsense the Maker chose to throw at her next.

And The Rose of Orlais was wedged inside a copy of A Treatise on the Fade in Irving’s office, back at the Circle. Back at the Circle with her old life, and the man who'd gifted the book to her, the one who probably hated her now, the one she wouldn't think about.

Alistair had settled in beside her with a sigh.

“Alistair?”
“What is it?”

“I wouldn't really electrocute someone. That was a joke.”

“I'm not a templar, Solona. You can joke. And I didn't think you would do that.” She heard him shuffle uncomfortably in his bedroll. “But...you know, you can defend yourself if you need to. There'll be more like Daveth and they won't all be harmless idiots.”

“We're not allowed to use magic against - “

“You're not in the Circle now, and you're not an apostate.” She rolled over - she couldn't see his face, but she heard the conviction in his voice. “You'll learn other types of combat but at the end of the day you're a mage, and magic is your weapon. And if that's how you need to defend yourself, the Wardens will have your back.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Somewhere an owl screeched, and Solona flinched. The sounds of the outdoors took some getting used to after a lifetime of confinement, and here in the Wilds everything seemed somehow closer, louder, more dangerous.

“Solona?”

“Yes?”

“Duncan told me the story - how you came to be conscripted. He believes you were there for the right reasons, or at least thought you were. And that's good enough for me.”

“I didn't know,” she said, her voice catching. “I was trying to help, I thought…”

His hand sought out hers in the darkness, squeezing her fingers quickly before letting go. “Regardless, when you join us the past is the past. You don't belong to the Circle now, or the Chantry. Nobody's going to send you back.”

“What if I fail the Joining?”

Alistair took a long time to reply. “Whatever happens, you won't be sent back.” He turned from her, pulling the blanket up over his shoulders.

“Alistair?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”
It was hard to say how it began.

Screams. Feet pounding on the stone floor, the ring of drawn steel. Screams. The stench of blood and sulphur, a ripping, tearing, burning pain. Screams.

_I can make it stop._ He could block his ears, cover his eyes but when he looked again she was still there. _I can give you anything you want, Cullen. Rest. Peace. Me._

Gerrett had died first, cleaved almost in half by one of those…things. His once-laughing eyes clouded and sightless and his blood had swirled in the air, surrounding the mages in a red miasma as they laughed, drunk with power.

The pain was constant, like red hot needles under his skin. _Doesn't it feel good, Cullen?_ Her lips trailed along the underside of his jaw. _Having me inside you? Give in and it won't hurt any more. We'll be one - I'll be buried in you and you in me. That's what you always wanted, isn't it? To be buried in me._

Sherard was next of his friends to die, the youngest of them. He'd stuttered and begged, offered them whatever they wanted if they'd just make it stop. But Uldred had found him wanting and the rest of them had been forced to watch as he was eviscerated.

 Mostly she just taunted him with visions. Parted lips, quivering flesh, bodies writhing together in ecstasy, arousal mingling with the pain until the two were indistinguishable in his fractured mind. _This is what you wanted._ Bent over the library table with her robes around her waist. On her back, silenced, unable to move as he unbuckled his armour.

“_I didn't…that's not what I wanted._”

_It doesn't excite you?_

Maker help him, it did.

Clyde was a younger son of…who? Some Arl in the Bannorn. He couldn't say how long he'd been without lyrium and small details were beginning to slip his memory. Clyde had been on the stuff
longest and by the time they sacrificed him he saw relief in the man's eyes as the blood drained out of him. At that stage, Cullen still hadn't wanted to die.

It was another sort of torture, his craving for the blue mineral consuming his waking hours. The rake of demonic nails over his skin was a blessed distraction from the headaches that plagued him. Thirst that his meagre rations of water could never quench, hands that were white with cold, fatigue that wore down his defences until it was only sheer bloody-mindedness that kept him from becoming thrall to a demon.

Teige had always worked twice as hard as most of the templars, determined to prove herself. She wouldn't yield, not when they threatened her, not when they cajoled her, not when they tortured her. In the end a frustrated Uldred made her die slowly, made her watch as her blood was used to summon more demons. Demons that were bound to the broken bodies of mages to become twisted abominations. He could recall her screams as a weeping mage child was transformed in front of her, the little girl’s flesh tearing and mutating until she was unrecognisable even as human. Those screams had gone on and on, and when she had finally fallen silent he was glad.

They spared no one. Except Cullen, alive in his gently humming cage, only the weight of his armour keeping his kneeling body upright.

“Please,” he begged. “Please, just let me die with the rest.”

But I want you, Cullen. Just say you're mine and all this will end. We can be together.

Flashes of another life - she was sprawled naked in unmade sheets, moaning his name as she touched herself. Gazing up at him with her soft pink lips wrapped around his cock. Crawling on all fours with shackles around her ankles, bruised and sobbing. Sitting beside him on the farm porch in Honnleath, her fingers entwined in his and her belly swollen with his child.

“Lies!” he cried. “Make it stop, please! Please, Solona.”

Mine, Cullen. You're mine. It's just a matter of time.
Dearest Juliet,

I hope I am the first to tell you that you have a fine, strong nephew. I wanted to call him Julien but Edwin thought that might antagonise Mama... I told him that was half the point and we nearly quarrelled! Anyway, his name is George, after Papa, and we just adore him to bits.

I'm sorry again about what happened with Mama. I just know if she'd had time to cool down she would have apologised - I do wish you would have stayed longer. Alec's wife was most disappointed she didn't get to meet you. She's a sweet little thing, really.

Edwin and I would be glad to have you stay with us in the city, but of course it would need to be approved by the Chantry. I'm not sure what the process is but I promise I'll look into it.

Simon de Hugues won't stop asking after you - I do believe you put a spell on him, you naughty thing! He was absolutely bereft to find out you weren't allowed visitors, but he wishes me to ask your permission to write to you. I think you should let him, I do believe he's in love with you!

Love from myself, Edwin and baby Georgie,

Lavinia

Dear Lavinia,

Congratulations to you both on the new arrival, I'm sure you will make wonderful parents. I do hope one day I can meet little George but it is rare to be allowed out of the Circle, so please do not get your hopes up. Don't fret for me, I'm kept busy with my studies and I'm quite happy to be amongst my own kind and not a source of embarrassment to my family - at least not a visible one.

Please don't bait Mama on my account, I'm sure I've caused enough damage for one lifetime. I suspect if I'd stayed longer it might have resulted in permanent injury to one of us - although I shouldn't say so in writing, the templars might take it as a threat!

Don't encourage Lord de Hugues. There is nothing between us and no hope for more, and it would be cruel to let him hope otherwise. Tell him not to write, tell him I'm in solitary confinement or dead or whatever it takes to get such foolish ideas out of his head. I suspect you will see this as a challenge, Vini, and I beg you not to meddle - he's young and well-to-do and if he's not encouraged, some girl or other will turn his head within the week.

All my love to your little family,

Juliet.

Juliet,

I regret that the Chantry is unwilling to release you into our “custody”, as they so charmingly put it. Georgie is very disappointed - he's unable to express it with much more than a spit bubble, but I'm his mama and I can tell these things.
Also disappointed is your beau Simon - now before you scold me, I haven’t encouraged him in any way but I think it’s very romantic, like something out of a novel.

Papa asked me to let you know that Drakon died. I told him you probably didn’t even know that smelly old dog was still around, much less alive, and why not write and tell you himself? He just gave me this terribly wounded look. I believe he transferred all his love for you onto that ridiculous puppy, but Edwin tells me that’s a silly notion.

Do write often!

Love, your sister Lavinia

———

Ostwick, 9:36 Dragon Age

“Oh Maker…quick, I'm nearly there.”

Juliet’s fingers carded through the fair hair of the man between her legs and he picked up his pace, fingers pumping fast in and out while the flat of his tongue pulsed hard against her. She came silently, head falling back on the stone wall.

“Fuck,” she muttered. “That was…oh.”

Lewin grinned up at her, rubbing his jaw. “You want to get that look off your face before a templar comes along. You look like you caught the wrong end of a smite.”

“There's a right end?” Still breathless, she helped him to his feet, smoothing her robes back down. “We should both get out of here - it smells like sex.”

“Forget something?”

“Shit.” She reached down for the smallclothes hooked around one ankle, wriggling them back into place. “Thanks for that.”

He peered around the corner - the coast was clear for now. “Same time next week?”

“I'll be here.” She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, cupping him through his robes. “Next week is your turn.”

“As if I've forgotten.”

She waited a moment for him to head down the hall before turning in the opposite direction. Of the handful of mages she trusted enough for these furtive trysts, he was her favourite - attractive, discreet, and with no apparent desire to muddy the waters with feelings.

Perhaps most importantly he was efficient. He could get her off with a minimum of fuss and they’d be clothed and gone before the next patrol came along. Time was of the essence if they didn't want to be caught, and for the risk they took it wouldn't do to leave unsatisfied.
“You there! Mage!”

She turned around, coolly meeting the eyes of a young templar. “Me, ser?”

He'd look much prettier if he didn't scowl like that. “What are you doing on this floor?”

“I have a private lesson with Senior Enchanter Lydia,” she answered, letting the hint of a smile play around the corners of her mouth. “Same time every week, ser…are you new?”

“Never mind that.” The young man was apparently immune to flirtation. “Let me see your permission slip.”

Juliet allowed her annoyance to show. Lydia was her mentor, and she hadn't needed a permission slip to be up here since a year after her Harrowing - it was a small circle in Ostwick and the templars just knew who she was. “I don't have one.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don't have one?”

“That's what I said.”

The templar huffed in annoyance. “Mage, if you think - “

“Problem, Enchanter Trevelyan?”

“Not at all, Ser Millward.” Juliet smiled brightly at the new arrival. “I was just getting acquainted with your colleague here. Ser…?”

"This is Bennick, Enchanter Trevelyan. Newly arrived."

"I would never have guessed."

“Ser, this mage has no slip.”

“I don't see what my underclothes have to do with this.”

Ser Millward smirked a little, and the new templar glared at them both.

“Off you go, Trevelyan - don't want to keep the senior enchanter waiting now, do we?”

“Certainly not!” Gifting both men with a charming smile, she continued along the hall, furious whispers breaking out behind her.

“What are you doing? That's Bann Trevelyan’s daughter!”

“So the rules don't apply?”

“I don't know where you're from, Bennick, but here in Ostwick we have respect for our noble families.”

“You mean they pay you?”

“They give enough to the Chantry to pay your wage a hundred times over, boy. She's got permission to be up here. Never mind the bloody paper.”

Grinning, she ducked into Lydia's office.

“Held up, were we?” The older woman glanced up from the scroll she had been perusing.
“Templars.” Juliet shrugged.

“So I heard.” Lydia looked at her sharply. “Things are changing, Juliet. The Circle might not be this way forever.”

“And that's a bad thing?”

“It could be.”

“The Ferelden circle was granted autonomy,” she argued. “Not all change is for the worse.”

“That change brought them barely in line with the privileges you have here.” The senior enchanter’s voice was uncharacteristically sharp. “Your brother is a templar in Kirkwall, isn't he?”

“Yes. Michael.” She hadn't seen him in thirteen years. “We're not close.”

“That's hardly surprising, I suppose. News coming from there has been…disturbing. It's hard to sort fact from fiction, with the restrictions they have on communication, but there are rumours of blood magic - “

“When are there not rumours of blood magic?”

“Credible rumours. Forced tranquillity, disappearances on both sides. Tensions between mages and templars are coming to a head and when they do, it won't just be Kirkwall affected.”

“Affected how?”

She spread her hands wide. “Who knows? Maybe an Exalted March. Maybe the Right of Annulment. The templars you aggravate today could have your life in their hands tomorrow.”

Juliet sighed. “Lydia, if it comes to the Right of Annulment it won't matter what the templars think of us - we'll all be dead. They have our lives in their hands as it is.” She smiled mischievously. “Anyway, I plan to win him over.”

“You've been lucky so far, Juliet. Your name protects you and the templars here aren't so bad - but there are plenty out there who'll never see you as anything but a robe. And when the tide turns, they'll stick together.”

“Then we'll have to stick together too, won't we?”

Lydia looked at her until Juliet grew uncomfortable with the silence, fiddling with the end of her long braid. Finally she gave her apprentice a wry smile. “If it comes to that, let's hope we do.”
Solona (not for me)

Lake Calenhad, 9:30 Dragon Age

There was something beautiful about Kinloch Hold from a distance. It wasn’t a view Solona was familiar with, the slender spire of the tower rising over the waters of Lake Calenhad, tinged crimson by the sunset. Looking out from the inside was all she’d ever known.

She’d wished to be out of sight of the tower before they set up camp but they’d all been so weary, tired and bruised in both body and spirit. Now she couldn’t seem to take her eyes off the building that once had been her prison. Once, it had been her home.

The faint creak of leather was all the warning she had of Zevran's presence before he crouched down next to the rocks where she sat, following her line of sight to the dusk-silhouetted tower.

“So, you and the templar…?”

There was a time not so long ago when she found it disconcerting, this habit of stealth in a man who had tried to take her life. Now it was just something she'd come to expect from the assassin, as much a part of him as his brash self-confidence or his effortless flirting.

“No,” Solona said decisively. “There was nothing like that. Not what you're thinking.”

Zevran's eyes flickered over her face, too knowing. “But you were the one thing he wanted. Did you know?”

Cullen’s words still sat like a cold ball of iron in her belly. “No,” she said again. “He was friendly, that's all. We were…”

Friends? Could a mage and a templar ever be friends? Apparently not. It was his duty to oppose her, and all that she was.

“You regret what might have been,” the elf guessed.

“Nothing might have been. Even if…” She shook her head angrily. “Mages aren't allowed. Not with templars, not with anyone.”

“Aren't allowed what?” There was a gentleness in the way Zevran pushed back the unruly strands of her hair, his thumb just brushing the skin beneath her ear. “Love? Joy? Sex?”

“Any of that.” Suddenly flushed, she stood up only to find him standing as well, elegant fingers resting on the nape of her neck and his golden eyes boring into hers.

“You're not in the Circle any more, little mage,” he murmured. “You can have anything you want.”

There was a surge of desire so sudden and strong she almost swayed into his arms. A demon, there must be a demon…but no, there was just the assassin, his hand warm and tangible on her neck and a question in his eyes.

“You're wrong.” Panicked, she took a step back and he let his hand fall. “There's too much - I can't. That's not for me.”
“Ah, Solona.” He made no move to follow her, but none of the heat had left his gaze - she could almost feel it on her skin, teasing unwelcome feelings from her suddenly treacherous body. “One day you will realise that you deserve what joy you can get, and I will be here.” He gave a tiny, mocking bow. “Good night, my beautiful Grey Warden.”

Flustered, she lingered after he had gone, breathing deep lungfuls of the cool night air. Too many feelings, guilt and sorrow and regret and anger and now, damn him, the warm coil of desire…it made her want to throw herself into something, drink or battle or even fucking, Maker help her, but that would just lead to another untidy riot of feelings and that was the last thing she wanted or needed now.

She stumbled into her tent, falling on the bedroll before she even began fumbling with her armour, toeing off her boots. Sleep would solve everything, or at least make it go away for a time. But sleep receded the moment she closed her eyes - it was all rending, tearing flesh and gore-spattered walls. The feeling of the veil parchment-thin around her and the press of hungry demons, Cullen’s hollow, resentful eyes and why the fuck would she want to return to the Fade anyway, hadn't she just spent an eternity lost in its twisting corridors?

Swearing softly, she conjured a glimmer of light and searched around for her pouch. Inside her fingers closed over the familiar scarlet-bound spine of The Rose of Orlais.

It smelled of leather and parchment, of idle afternoons curled up on her favourite bench in the library and evenings in the dormitory before lights out. The dry whisper of each turning page spoke to her of a time when everything between she and Cullen was unspoken and unspoilt.

The words blurred in front of her eyes. The tears she shed weren't for the loss of Cullen - she'd never been foolish enough to think he was hers to lose. But so many dead and Cullen tortured, twisted until the kindness bled out of him and he looked at her like she was just another monster. And could she honestly say she wouldn't have become one, that her will or even her mind wouldn't have broken? Fire made flesh. A demon asleep.

But demons wouldn't tempt her - not as long as she remembered that whatever promises they might whisper in her ear at night - love, family, normalcy - those things weren't for her, however the touch of slender fingers might still warm the nape of her neck.

Letting the light die she curled up on her side, arms wrapped around the hollow ache in her middle.

“I found it in the tower…in the senior enchanters’ quarters. I thought you might like it.”

“Why, Solona, this is a most generous gift!” Wynne beamed, turning the scarlet-covered book over in her hands. “Have you read it?”

Solona glanced away to where the last of their camp was being cleared away - Alistair looked back with pity in his eyes, and Zevran…something else, something more speculative, more appraising. A look that made heat coil in her belly and her thighs clench.

“I had a look. Romance.” She shrugged. “It's not for me.”
She didn't listen.

Why should he be surprised? She'd shown her loyalties the night she left the Circle. On his darkest nights Cullen wondered if she hadn't been Jowan's lover all along, the two of them laughing at his boyish infatuation before they rutted in some dark corner - if he closed his eyes he could see them writhing together, robes up around their waists and her full lips parted in lewd ecstasy.

The thought made him hard, and ashamed, and bitterly, bitterly angry.

Now she was gone again and they spoke of her as some sort of hero, their saviour instead of the disgraced traitor she should be remembered as. But they would, wouldn't they? Mages would always side with each other before Chantry law, before safety and practicality and common decency. Solona had shown him that on more than one occasion. Of those remaining thanks to her misplaced mercy, how many had suspected Uldred's plan? Had remained silent thinking an uprising might give them freedom? How many had rejoiced in those first moments of chaos before it had become clear that the blood mages would turn on their own as quickly as the templars?

He fancied he could hear them whispering, always whispering. Just waiting for the right moment to strike. Well let them try, he'd kill them all, every man, woman and child before he found himself caged again. For now he'd be watchful, distant - no more leniency, no more illusions of friendship.

If he could thank Solona for anything, it was for teaching him that lesson.

“She was one of our own, and we will honour her as such.”

Greagoir’s words seemed to come to him from the end of a long tunnel. Sacrifice. Inspiration. Hero.

Death.

The Knight-Commander was looking at him gravely, expectantly. He was expected to say something.

“Ser.” His own voice was flat and hollow in his ears.

“I know you were friendly with the girl - if you wanted some time off, for contemplation…” Greagoir’s normally flinty grey eyes were softened with a sympathy that made Cullen bristle - did he think him weak?

“No!” he said, too quickly. There were so few of them now, he had to be vigilant, always vigilant. “No, Ser, I would prefer not.”
“Good. I will travel to Denerim for the funeral, to represent the Order. I’d like to leave you in charge.” Greagoir leaned back in his chair. “Do you think you can handle that, Cullen?”

“Yes, Ser.”

“I leave in the morning. You will take the rest of the day off.” A raised hand silenced his protest. “That’s an order. You’ve been pushing yourself to exhaustion, lad, and you’re no use to me if you’re not sharp.”

“Yes, Ser.”

“Another thing, Cullen.”

“Ser?”

“I know the…situation here was not resolved to your liking. But I want you to remember that the Amell girl saved many lives - yours included - and she didn't have to. Whatever circumstances led to her conscription that is worthy of respect, and there's no shame in admitting it.”

Cullen swallowed hard. “Ser.”

Dismissed, he wandered back through the halls. The Chantry beckoned, but Andraste’s stone face with its empty eye sockets seemed to stare at him accusingly. She knew the treachery in his heart, that if he went in there now it would not be her sacrifice that he contemplated.

He was near stumbling by the time he emerged, blinking, onto the grounds around the base of the tower. A fine drizzle fell on his face and beaded in his eyelashes and the wet smell of dark earth was all around him, damp grass and elfroot and leaf litter. Lake and sky mocked him with the blue-grey of her eyes.

What weakness made him kneel on the ground, gauntlets digging into the black soil? He could almost hear her soft voice here, see the sunlight glinting in her hair and he couldn't stop the sobs that wracked his chest, the hot tears mingling with the rain. It was strange, so strange that she should be dead and he still here, that the thoughts he wished he'd shared with her remained unspoken and all his bitter, cruel words should be the last thing he ever said to her.

“I'm sorry,” he found himself moaning, not sure if he even meant it but it was a tide that wouldn't stop, a litany more real than the Chant, over and over into the blue-grey sky. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”
Ostwick, 9:41 Dragon Age

“Trevelyan lands? We're not going that way.” The lead mercenary’s piercing blue eyes took in her dusty blue robes, the bandits groaning and twitching at her feet. “Not for a couple of days, anyway. Got a job to the east.” He scratched his dark stubble. “Seems like you can handle yourself though.”

“I was holding them off. I don't know how long that would have lasted if you hadn't come along.” Juliet kicked one of the fallen men weakly, wincing at the pain it caused her blistered foot. She was sore, parched and exhausted and the road stretched interminably on.

“What'd they want?” He was handsome in a rough way - it looked like he took care of his appearance, even the days-old growth on his face kept neatly in line. The whole crew looked clean, unlike the stinking bandits they'd helped her put down.

“To rob me, at first. Once they believed I didn't have anything…”

“They thought they'd take something else.” The man spat. “We could still finish them off.”

As tempting as it was, Juliet had no appetite for more violence.

Lydia's dead. You should go now, while you can - if the war's coming here your name won't save you, Trevelyan.

War? Nothing in the streets of Ostwick had pointed to a war. She'd tried to find passage out of the city, but the combination of Circle robes and a lack of currency had made it a fool's errand. In desperation she'd nearly turned back towards the Circle…but there was no safety to be found there, Bennick’s warning had made that much clear. His tabard had been splattered with blood - whose, she would likely never know. Now here she was on the road north, the day's warmth fading and her shoes already wearing through.

“Tell you what,” the mercenary said. “We could use a mage on this job. All above board, just a little intimidation. Then we get you back to your family.”

“I didn't say they were - “

“I didn't get where I am by being stupid, Lady Trevelyan. Stay on this road and if you're lucky you'll reach there on foot in five, six days. If you're unlucky, well…”

Fuck it. Who knew if they were trustworthy or not, they had horses and were likely going to sleep somewhere more comfortable than under a hedge. What choice did she have?

“I've got no coin,” she said. “And if it's payment you're after, I can't guarantee my family will be grateful to see me back.”

“That's a familiar tale.” He reached down and offered her a hand. “Name's Jed.”

“Juliet. Pleased to meet you.”

“I don't hear that too often.” His hand was warm and rough, grip firm but not crushing. “You can ride behind me if you don't mind cuddling up to a merc.”

She returned his open smile. “If you're not worried about an apostate at your back, I'm sure we'll
"You need some new clothes," Jed said that evening over stew-filled trenchers in a roadside inn. "Not that the boys don't mind seeing a nice pair of legs but it's not practical for riding, and it draws the wrong sort of attention if you know what I mean."

"I do." She wasn't oblivious to the sideways looks and mutters of the taproom patrons - perhaps surrounding herself with armed soldiers hadn't been the worst outcome.

"So do we need to worry about templars? Going to run into trouble with the law?"

"I wish I knew. A templar told me the Circles were disbanded."

Jed nodded. "Heard as much. So you're, what - free to go?"

"He told me to leave, wasn't too clear on the details. I don't know if I'm meant to hide, or run… there's talk of a fortress in Orlais where the rebels are gathering but I don't know if I want to join a rebellion and I can't even get a day's ride out of bloody Ostwick without wearing out my shoes and having to fight off a pack of fucking bandits."

"Hey." His hand closed over hers. "Next few days, you're one of ours. Then we'll get you back to that family that might or might not want you, and you can hide out there until someone tells you where to go next."

"That doesn't sound like the worst plan, I suppose." For the first time all day she felt like perhaps she wasn't hopelessly lost, turned loose on the world with a target on her back. "But where do I get clothes?"

"The lad should have something to fit." He nodded to the group’s archer. "Now, you happy to bunk in with me?"

"That's…" Her eyes widened.

"Two beds. And I won’t try anything, don't fancy lightning to my balls." Jed grinned. "Unless you want me to try something?"

If he was looking for a blush, he'd picked the wrong mage. "I'll let you know." She fixed him with a level stare, smiling when he was the first to look away.

"Right then, Lady Trevely. I think I'm going to enjoy working with you."

The job went off without a hitch - all she had to do was set a barrier against snipers and let loose a
hint of lightning when there was a threat of non-payment.

“I've never seen so much gold appear so fast,” one of the mercs rumbled appreciatively.

“We should keep you around.” Jed’s arms were wrapped loosely around her waist where she sat before him in the saddle. “You any good at healing?”

“It’s not my best talent,” she replied. “But I should be able to patch up minor wounds, and I can fix hangovers.”

“You’re hired, Trevelyan!”

Juliet laughed, but the thought was tempting. Armed protection, a decent if unsteady income - the warm body at her back might also be a factor. “So, tomorrow…?”

“We deliver you home, as promised.”

“And tonight?”

She heard his uneven intake of breath. “It’s not needed. You’ve more than earned your escort, my lady.”

“Not needed?” She turned her head slightly, feeling the rasp of stubble against her face. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?”

One broad hand fell to her thigh, warm through the borrowed leggings.

“How d’you want it?” His breath was hot on her neck. “Gentle, rough, slow? I’m not too used to fine ladies like you.”

“How rough is rough?” she asked in a low voice, and his fingers tightened.

“I’ll follow your lead.” His teeth tugged gently on her earlobe, making her shiver. She pressed deliberately back against him and he hissed in a breath.

“Rough then? Could have guessed.” Dragging her hips closer, he reached up to cup her breasts. “Don’t reckon you’ve been done properly in a long time. Maybe never.”

“I know my way around.” She arched slowly into his touch and he chuckled, deep and gravelly.

“I don’t doubt it, the way you’ve been eye-fucking me the last few days. Still, there’s time to back out if you don’t want to go too far below your station.”

“I’m a mage. We have no stations.”

He laughed ruefully. “If that’s what you want to believe, I won’t argue.”

That night there were no twin beds. Neither were there tangled robes or rushed fumbling against the wall, hips pressing close together to smother the telltale noises of flesh joining. Just savage,
joyful, uninhibited sex.

“You're so quiet,” he grunted at one point, driving hard into her. “You sure this is good?”

“How…could this not be good?” She let his hand slip under the small of her back, angling her hips to take him deeper. “I'm just not used to making noise.” Even this much was a throaty whisper in his ear, the habit of secrecy so ingrained she half expected to hear the heavy footfalls of templars in the corridor.

“You've got nothing to hide in here.” A sharp snap of his hips drew a reluctant squeak from her throat. “Come on, Trevelyan. Let me hear you.”

Her first finish came with a wail, smothered in the pillow. By the third she was screaming and panting and at the last both were silent, sated and breathless.

“Maker,” she whispered finally. The tallow candles had burned out an hour ago, only a sliver of moonlight illuminated their naked bodies. “I'm never going back to the Circle.”

“It'd be a fucking waste, that's for certain.” Jed drew her closer, pillowing his head on her sweat-soaked breasts. “The offer stands, by the way. If your people don't want you there's a place with us. The crew like you.” He kissed her damp skin. “I like you.”

She lay awake long after he dozed off, fingers tracing the knotted scars on his back. A place with us. It was more than her family had ever offered.

“This it, then?” Jed whistled slowly. “Nice. Think I might become a Bann myself some day.”

“I think you'd be bored.” Juliet leaned up to kiss him softly on the cheek. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Don't thank me yet. I'll wait by the gate a while in case they don't let you in.”

“If I don't see you again - “

“Yeah, yeah.” He cut her off with a wink. “Best night of my life, too. Good luck, Trevelyan.”

She felt his eyes on her all the way to the imposing front door. She knocked hard, twice, and when she looked back the courtyard was empty.

“Yes?” It was a new maid who answered the door, clearly unimpressed by the strange girl in her ill-fitting mercenary clothes.

“I'd like to see Bann Trevelyan, please. Or Lady Trevelyan.” Suddenly nervous, she swallowed against the lump in her throat. “Could you please tell them it's Juliet.”
“Too high.” Zevran watched her with a critical eye as she slashed and parried. “Here, watch me again.”

He moved with a fluid grace she could never hope to match, the daggers as much a part of him as his hands. “See, I think that’s what I’m doing but when I actually do it...my body just doesn’t move the way I want it to.”

Solona knew she shouldn’t have mentioned her body to the assassin; his golden gaze swept over her and she became very conscious that only a thin shirt and leggings protected her modesty. Clothes that had seemed eminently suitable for sparring became provocative under his frank appraisal.

“Movement is a skill you must learn, my warden. Dancing, fucking, fighting - all these things take practice. If you do not wish to practice, then…” He shrugged. “Go back to wielding your staff. It has served you tolerably.”

That would require less effort, certainly, but...she glanced to where Spellweaver lay sheathed in its scabbard. How could she explain the way the sword had sung to her when she found it, its subtle vibration ceasing when her hand closed around the hilt, as if it breathed a sigh of relief? How the Arcane Warrior memories within her had swirled and settled, something deep within her whispering yes, this is your sword.

“If it’s just a matter of practice, I’d like to keep trying. If you don’t mind teaching me, that is.”

“And forgo the chance to have this radiant beauty all to myself? Perish the thought!” He gave her a wolfish grin. “Again! More slowly this time. Your movement may not be perfect, but it is still very pleasing to the eye.”

Self-consciously she mimicked his movements the best she could, the unfamiliar dance causing neglected muscles to ache. “That time felt better. Did it look better?”

“It did indeed, my beauty. Do that a hundred times without putting your own eye out, and I may let you practice with your sword.”

“It might be easier with my sword than with a stick,” she countered.

“Ah, my impatient little mage, you lack the strength to wield that sword.” Sidling closer, he lifted her arm. “When you have hard muscle here - “ he squeezed her bicep, “and here - “ with a firm hand on her midriff, “then you may wield a sword. When training with sticks no longer makes your arms burn and your heart race.”

She was very still, hyper-aware of his arm around her waist and his warm chest at her back. “My heart isn’t racing now.”

“Ah, but it is.” He pressed closer. “I can feel it. Boom-boom. Boom-boom. It is - how do you say? Fluttering in your breast, like one of the girls in those books of yours.”
At his words her heart did seem to flutter, her throat becoming dry. “You mean Wynne’s book?”

“Yes, Wynne’s book. The one you so fortuitously found lying inside a larger book beneath a stack of still larger books.” His laughter tickled her neck. “It is a handsomely bound book, if a little dog-eared in some of the more...salacious passages.”

“Just how much did you read, exactly?” Solona tried to keep her tone light, but the tremble in her voice betrayed her. “I’m beginning to think I gifted it to the wrong person.”

“Hmm, I have read enough. For me, there are too many flowery euphemisms in such a book. Swords and sheaths, this sort of nonsense.” Almost imperceptibly the hand at her waist tightened, his other fingers brushing lightly across her jaw. “I prefer to call a cock a cock, and a cunt a cunt. What about you, my warden?”

“I don’t…” There was a melting, tingling feeling between her thighs and she found it hard to focus, hard to figure out how the conversation had ended up here with his fingertips at her throat and his arm brushing the underside of her breasts. “What do you want, Zevran?”

“Ah, you see? This is where language is important. If I were to say, I want you, it could mean any manner of things.” He was still now, his grip neither relaxing nor tightening. “But if I was to be explicit...perhaps if I were to suggest that I wished to run my tongue over your breasts, or to wet my fingers between your thighs, or to slide my cock inside your virgin pussy - now then, there could be no misunderstanding. Those are all things I want. So my question to you, my warden, is what do you want?”

She wanted to slap him. She wanted to storm back to camp and banish him from their party. She wanted to stay just where she was, very still, and let him do all those things without having to make a decision she couldn’t take back. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.” His hands slipped from her and he took a step, just one step, back. “It matters a great deal.”

Love isn’t for you, she reminded herself. Attachment isn’t for you. But as promised, he had been explicit - no mention of love, no mention of attachment beyond the anatomical. Could it hurt so much, just to know? Just to find out what those books were on about, to see what led people into those dark corners of the Circle, what made them moan and gasp and pant in the darkness.

Turning slowly, she forced herself to meet his eyes. “Will you show me?”

He smiled a lazy, self-satisfied smile. “But of course, my warden.”

As the leaves murmured overhead, she learned of the warm-rough feel of hands on her bare skin, the slick heat of mouth and tongue on stiff nipples, the sharp ecstasy when his lips drew on her aching flesh. The uneven ground was at her back and his thigh between her legs, pressing, sliding maddeningly against her as his mouth worked skillfully at her bared breasts until she arched and wriggled beneath his tongue.

Solona whimpered incoherently, having some idea of what she needed but too shy to ask.

Zevran reached up and stroked her jaw, tilting her face towards his. “Ah, my lovely. You are close, no?” His deft fingers loosened the ties at her waist. “Can I help you along?” He didn't have to spell it out for her - his fingers lingered above her waistband, stroking tiny circles that made her hips rise from the ground. Unsure what would come out of her mouth if she tried to speak, she merely nodded.

The first brush of his fingertips made her head fall back. The next touch dipped into the slick
between her legs and swirled once and it was enough to break her - she jerked, crying out, her thighs squeezing tight around his fingers where they still stroked her. Her heart wasn't fluttering now...it was thumping, pounding in the wake of a feeling that no written romance could describe.

“Thank you, my warden.” Zevran's smile was languid as he withdrew his hand from her leggings. “That was a beautiful sight indeed.”

She sat up. “I need...” This was madness. The day was cooling, Maker knew how long they'd been gone and here she was, flushed and half-naked on the ground. In a panic she retrieved her discarded clothing.

“Regrets? Already?”

“No.” She hastily retied her breastband and struggled into her shirt. “No, I don't...I just...” Absurdly, she felt herself on the edge of tears. “Just give me space, Zevran. Please. I need to think about this.”

“Solona.” Sitting up, he craned his neck to meet her eyes. “Know this: I will never ask more of you than you are willing to give.”

“That's...” She paused in buttoning her shirt. “That helps.”

Zevran rose to his feet with a catlike grace she envied. “Is all well, then?”

“It will be.” Solona smiled shyly. “Thank you.”

“How about now, my warden?”

“Hmm?” Solona stirred sleepily, twisting to look up at Zevran. His fingers ran through the loose strands of her hair and trailed across her bare back.

“How about now, my warden?”

It was difficult to make out his features - the fire in the Redcliffe Castle guest room was banked for the night and in its muted glow she could see little more than a pair of narrowed golden eyes.

“No.” She felt sore and a bit sticky, still somewhat self-conscious about their naked bodies pressed together beneath the sheets. Apprehensive - what would the others say if they knew? But regrets... he had been so patient since their first encounter beneath the trees, so understanding, and tonight he had offered nothing less. “I'm glad I got to do that, at least once. I'm happy it was with you.” She ran a hand over the swirling tattoos on his chest.

“You speak as if you plan on dying tomorrow, my little mage.”

“Not tomorrow. Not for a while, I hope.”

Her eyes drifted shut again as he stroked lazily down the curve of her hip, over her buttocks and thighs, up to the small of her back.
“You know,” she heard him say, “when I took the contract against you I had planned on dying. I thought you would kill me, but you did not. And I am glad now that I live, that I share this bed with a woman such as yourself. You have seen too little of this world, my beauty, to wish to die.”

“I don’t wish it.” She struggled up to see his face properly, the sheets falling to her waist. “There are things I have to see through. The Landsmeet, the Blight. I just can’t see anything…after that. I can’t imagine a future.”

In the half-light Zevran's eyes seemed dark and sad. He drew her close to him and nuzzled into the crook of her shoulder.

“Let me imagine it for you, my warden. You will defeat the Blight and be a hero to all. Men will duel for your hand.” He pressed her fingers between his, planting a kiss on the inside of her wrist. “You will marry for love, and riches, and have an estate somewhere warm. Antiva, perhaps. Surrounded by a host of fat, healthy children.”

The tiniest of sobs drew his attention. Tutting, he kissed the tears from her face.

“Ah, Solona, Solona. Why should this not be true?”

“No,” was all she could whisper. “No.” Her lips found his, her body melting into his. No more talk, no more tales about a fantasy that could never be. She had this, and it was real, and primal, and forbidden and for that reason she would savour it even more. Drawing him down on top of her she wrapped her legs around his narrow hips and whimpered into his mouth when he pushed inside her for the second time that night. No past, no future - this was enough, this would have to be enough.
It didn't take Cullen long to decide that he hated the ocean. The constant, rolling motion. The horizon, flat and identical in all directions. And the ship, the void-blasted ship with its tiny spaces and the smell that permeated below decks, of sweat and waste and desperation.

His cramped cabin offered more privacy than most passengers had. He was grateful the order had bought him a place to sleep alone and safely store his things, even if he spent as little time there as possible - with the door open the smell was unbearable, and closed it was claustrophobic, suffocating. Once the ship had left port he spent most of his time on the deck, watching the neverending horizon bob up and down. Or like now, in the moonless dark, just listening to the lap of waves against the ship’s side.

“Templar.” He turned in surprise - the voice came from the doorway of the private abovedeck cabin, a female figure outlined in the lamplight spilling from within. “You are, aren't you? I saw you come aboard in your armour.”

“Do you need help?”

The woman’s laugh was rich and musical. “You could say that. Come here, templar.”

Cullen looked around. This section of deck was empty but for him and the mystery woman - could it be a trap? “Why…what can I help you with?” He moved closer and she stepped back into the light.

“You can help me drink this bottle.” She was older than Cullen, fair-haired with ruddy cheeks and a lilting accent he couldn't place. The cabin was at least three times the size of his own with a real bed instead of a hammock and a bench and table bolted to the floor. “Come in! I promise I'm not a mage.”

Confident that he would follow she sat heavily on the bench, pouring amber liquid into two pewter cups. It could have been the warm glow of lanterns or the wafting aroma of fine whiskey - either way, somehow Cullen found himself drawn inside the cabin.

“It's cold,” the stranger said. “Shut the door.” When Cullen obliged she slid the cup across to him. “So, templar, you have a name?”

“I - “ He rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “Cullen.”

“Have a drink, I Cullen.”
He didn't know too much about whiskey, but he could tell an expensive vintage when he tasted one. “Miss…you shouldn't be sharing this with me.”

“Really?” She gave him an arch lift of her eyebrows. “I should drink it alone, then? It's not Miss, by the way.”

Cullen wasn't sure if this piece of information made the fact of their being alone in her cabin more or less inappropriate. “Is your husband aboard?”

She seemed to find this amusing. “No, he's not. Will you sit down? It would make the room feel bigger.” He perched awkwardly on the bench, as far from her as he could sit. “Now tell me, what brings a fine young Ferelden templar across the Waking Sea?”

He was unable to hide his flush of shame. He would not share with this stranger his reaction at learning of the Circle mages’ autonomy, his ill-conceived outburst to the Knight-Commander. “I'm being transferred to the Kirkwall Circle.”

“I see.” Her green eyes bored through him. “Is that promotion or punishment?”

“I suppose I'll find out when I get there.”

Her laugh was sharp and sudden. “Why, Ser Cullen. Was that a joke?”

Still flustered, he allowed himself a shy grin. “And you?”

“I'm going home to Starkhaven.” She swirled the amber liquid in her cup, looking up at him through pale lashes.

That was the accent, then. “What brought you to Ferelden?”

“My husband. He was a merchant.”

“What does he do now?” Maker, but he was terrible at small talk, and her next remark made him realise just how bad.


“I - “ Aware that his mouth was gaping open, Cullen swallowed his discomfort with a large gulp of whiskey. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean…”

“To pry? I don't see why not, I started it.” Leaning over to refill his cup, she allowed him a glimpse of her unlaced bodice, the gap at the neck of her blouse hinting at an ample, milk-white bosom.

“I'm not sure if I should drink more, my lady. I don't know if it's appropriate - “

“I'm not a lady,” she corrected him, “and it's not at all appropriate. That's the point. Tell me, Cullen, have you much experience with women? I'm assuming from the way you're staring down my dress that you're not more interested in boys.”

“I'm not! I mean, I wasn't. Looking.” Another gulp of his drink, just to give him something else to focus on, and his head felt light and fuzzy.

“Let me tell you what's going to happen now, Cullen.” Biting her lip, she unlaced her bodice further. “You can finish your drink, and go back to your cabin, and this never happened. Or…” The bodice came free, the top of her blouse slipping from her pale shoulders. “You can stay here and offer a lonely widow some comfort.” She threw the rest of her whiskey back and sat the empty cup
on the table before watching him expectantly.

Blessed Andraste. He should go. He should…but in her eyes was a question, and his stillness was an answer. Her mouth pressed, wet and startling against his own, her tongue pressing the rich taste of whiskey onto his. A shift and a rustle of skirts and she was astride him, a hand snaking down to cup the front of his trousers.

“My Angus always said you Circle templars must be eunuchs.” Practised fingers stroked and squeezed, making him buck against her hand. “I guess he'll never know how wrong he was.”

His eyes falling shut, he felt her work his hand inside her blouse and squeeze it around one full breast. “Kiss my neck,” she ordered. “Fuck, yes, like that…oh, Maker.”

Shyness forgotten in the haze of lust and alcohol, he worked the dress further down her shoulders to bare her breasts, exploring the creamy flesh with hands and mouth. When he took one pale pink nipple between his lips and flicked his tongue against it she keened, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt to hold him in place.

“Please,” she gasped and took his hand, guiding it beneath her bunched skirts. A moment’s surprise when he encountered rough, wet curls where he had expected small clothes, then all was slick and heat as she pushed his fingers inside her with a whispered “Oh.”

Her head fell to his shoulder, one arm looped around his neck as the other hand clutched his wrist. “Like this,” she mumbled, rocking gently against him as she worked his hand up and down. “Oh, that feels good. Thank you, thank you.”

“What’s your name?” Cullen flushed at the thought that he hadn't asked as much before his fingers were buried in her cunt.

She looked at him in surprise then laughed, the same thought probably occurring to her. “Mary.” She kissed him, languid and sloppy, hips still riding his hand. “More,” she demanded between sweeps of her tongue. “More fingers. Harder. Yes, that's it…yes…”

There was no pretense at kissing now, just open-mouthed panting against his lips and a tiny whimper in the back of her throat. His fingers pumped and curled inside her and she ground the heel of his hand against her until she went still, then seemed almost to convulse, the wet walls of her cunt trembling around him. “Oh, Maker, fuck, ohhhhh…”

Cullen waited for her breathing to return to normal, uncertain what to do with his sex-slicked hand. He settled for wiping it on his thigh. “Was that good?”

“Good.” Tenderly she kissed his temple. “You don't know how I needed that.”

“Should I go?” There was no hiding his straining erection - if that was all she needed from him then he needed to be alone, and quickly.

Mary laughed, soft and throaty. “Don't you dare.” Deftly she reached inside his trousers, pumping his length with a firm hand. “I couldn't leave you in this state, now could I?” Abruptly she withdrew, laughing again at his groan of disappointment. “First, let's get out of these clothes.”

Cullen was standing with his shirt halfway off before he remembered his scars - thin, silvery against the skin of his arm. Mary might have missed them if he didn't freeze and stare, all at once self-conscious again.

“What have you got there?” Naked, she traced the marks with her fingertips, standing close enough
for her breasts to brush his chest. “Was it darkspawn?”

The neat parallel lines did look somewhat like claw marks - he could lie, make up a battle or the sort of roadside ambush that had made her a widow. Instead he remembered the trickle of blood following the line of Uldred’s knife - it had amused the man to use Cullen’s own life force to maintain the cage that trapped him.

“Blood mage,” he said quietly.

“You poor boy.” She drew his head to her shoulder, stroking his curly head, and after a moment’s hesitation he let his arms encircle her waist.

“It doesn't matter now.” Uldred was dead - she killed him, killed all of them while he cowered in a cage. Mary felt the tremor in his shoulders and forced him to meet her eyes.

“You've seen some things, haven't you, lad? Not such a boy, except in one way. Come then.” She lay down on the thin mattress and drew him on top of her. “Let's see what you're made of.”

Her body was soft and welcoming, her mouth as hot and hungry as before, and he was lost in the heady scent of her arousal, her pale, still youthful flesh yielding to his exploring hands.

“Now,” she moaned, “I want you now,” and suddenly instead of fair hair he saw waves of dark brown, blue-grey eyes above a cruel smile. Her nails were claws in his shoulders and her legs held him trapped like a spider in a web. A demon, a demon with the face of Solona...

“No!” Cullen gasped. He pushed free of her and hit the wall with a thud. “I can't! I can't, I'm sorry.”

“Oh, lad.” Mary was herself again, as she had always been. She reached out and stroked his face. “Guilt, is it? Chantry got in your head? Let me tell you a secret.” The pad of her thumb traced his lower lip. “Andraste doesn't care where you put your cock. And the Maker, well, he's turned his back on us…which is probably for the best, eh? If we're going to do what I hope we're going to do.”

Holding his gaze she turned, positioning herself on hands and knees with her ripe breasts hanging down.

“Does this help?” She drew one knee up towards her chest and he glimpsed the dark pink of her swollen sex. “You don't have to look at me. Easier for us both to pretend it's someone else, that way.”

“I don't need to pretend.” He needed to bury himself inside her and forget any of it had ever happened. “I don't mind being with you.”

“Well that's very sweet of you, Cullen.” Mary arched her back invitingly. “Shall we, then?” Her head hung down as he lined himself up with her entrance. “That's it. All the way, now.”

“Maker.” It was incredible to feel her warmth enveloping his shaft, the way she moved and clamped around him. Without thinking he began to thrust and she rocked back against him, his thighs hitting hers with a slap each time they joined. Obscene, yet somehow beautiful the way her breasts jiggled in his grasping hands, the way her elbows buckled and her shoulders shook as he pounded into her.

“Yes, sweetheart, that's it. Right there. Just a bit longer, yes, fuck…” Again she reached for his hand and pushed it between her legs, pressing hard against the slick pearl hidden there. “Touch me
She went over the edge with a drawn-out cry and he followed her seconds later, his hoarse groan joining hers, his seed mingling with the slick between her legs.

He rested his sweat-dampened forehead on her back, overcome by the force of his climax. She was shaking, and it took him some time to realise that she was crying, face pillowed in her folded arms.

“I’m sorry.” Horrified, he sat back on his heels. “I didn’t mean to upset you…what can I do?” Still weeping silently, she shook her head. “Mary? Should I go?”

“No, you fool,” she growled through her tears. “You think I want to wake up alone in this Maker-forsaken bed, on this stinking hull of a ship?” She turned a red-eyed glare on him. “Lie the fuck down, Cullen, and stay with me. Stay and give me something to think about other than my dead husband and my shit-caked wreck of a life. Alright? Or fuck off now and let me drink myself into the grave next to him.”

She stumbled from bed to wipe angrily between her thighs and he hovered, hopelessly out of his depth. “I’ll stay, then.”

“Do what you want.”

“I want to stay.”

“So stay.” The young widow glanced at him and despite her acid tone, he could see that she was pleased. “Do you snore?”

“No.”

“Well I do. And kick, and steal the bedclothes. Do you still want to stay?”

“Yes.” He stretched out on the bed, pressing close to the wall to leave her space. “Now come back to bed.”

The long days and nights of the sea journey blended into one. Cullen returned to his cabin only to wash and change clothes, and down his daily small vial of lyrium - he had been provided enough for the trip, no more and no less. After breaking his fast he would go back to Mary.

There were times when they slept, times when they talked, deliberately skirting around anything too personal or painful. They drank a lot - she had a seemingly endless supply, Starkhaven whiskies and Antivan brandies, Orlesian wines and Rivaini rums. Cullen had never been one to indulge much in alcohol but it became a habit when he was with her - drinking, playing cards and fucking, careless of the time of day or the weather outside.

It didn’t matter any more that the deck beneath him was constantly in motion because they were too - joined cock to cunt, mouth to mouth and everywhere in between, and if the waters were rough they just clung to each other all the harder.

The night a storm lashed the sea around them he lay between her spread legs and pleasured her with his mouth. As the crew ran about frantic on the water-soaked deck he had ears only for her
cries, her commands of slow, fast, harder, softer, there, more, more.

He had always been a quick study.

“Tell me about her,” she said in the calm of morning. His head was pillowed on her breast, their bare legs entwined as she stroked his curls. “The girl you think about when we're fucking.”

Cullen shifted to cup her breast, catching the stiff pink nipple between his fingers. “There wasn't anyone before you.”

“Ah, now, don't give me that.” Mary smiled lazily. “I know a broken heart when I see one. Did you have to leave her behind?”

“No. She was long gone by then.” He swallowed a sudden surge of bitter anger. “It doesn't matter - she's dead now.”

“I'm sorry, lad,” she said softly. “Was it the Blight?”

She'd know the tale - everyone did by now. The Hero of Ferelden slaying the archdemon and then, overcome by her wounds, dying beside its fallen body. He still couldn't reconcile the image with the quiet little mage he remembered, curled up on the bench with her nose buried in a book. Then again, he couldn't picture her aiding in the escape of a maleficar, the same type that tortured him and slaughtered his friends. May as well admit that he hadn't known her at all.

“Yes,” he said shortly. “The Blight.” He trailed his hand down to rest on her soft belly. “Tell me about Angus.”

“No.” Her voice shook. “We should have left at the first sign, should have taken everything we could carry and gotten the fuck out of Ferelden. But he had contracts to meet, investments. And now he's dead, the stupid bastard.” Her fingers tightened in his hair, and she rolled to straddle his waist. “Enough talk. I want you in me.”

She sank down on his cock, and the Blight was forgotten, all thought of lost loves drowned in the slick glide of flesh and rolling, bucking hips. After a time she reversed their positions and hooked her legs over his shoulders, demanding he drive into her harder, faster until she came with a fierce, angry scream.

“Fuck you,” she whispered, fists clenched. “Why didn't you listen? Why did you have to go?”

This time Cullen held her close as she cried, her words echoing in his head. Why did you have to go?

Chains. The heat was oppressive, the atmosphere even more so. The ugly Tevinter statues looming over the harbour captured a sense of despair so potent he could almost taste it.

This is your life now, the towering slaves seemed to say. Forget hope. Forget freedom.

The solid ground seemed to move beneath Cullen's feet and the haze of heat off the stone added to his sense of unreality. He adjusted his meagre belongings on his shoulder and turned back towards the ship.
There she was. A tight smile, a wave of farewell and then a swirl of skirts, a space on the deck as if she had never been.

“Cullen?” A voice as harsh and metallic as the chains in the harbour, and he found himself under the cold, appraising glare of bright blue eyes. “I am Knight-Commander Meredith. Welcome to Kirkwall.”
Juliet (caught on myriad jewels)

Chapter Summary

Well this turned out super long and a bit smutty.

Ostwick, 9:41 Dragon Age

After a week back in the city, Juliet had almost shaken the feeling that she would be arrested each time she stepped outside her sister's house. Still, it was a relief to walk back inside the gates and make her way to the cool sanctuary of the inner courtyard. Here, the air smelled of lilacs and a litter of kittens wrestled tirelessly amongst the fallen petals. Here she felt less of a burden than at home, if home she could call it.

“Thank you for having me here.” Lavinia was bouncing her youngest babe on her lap, watching little George and his younger brother line up wooden soldiers along a low wall, and Juliet smiled to see her such a picture of contented motherhood. Briefly she wondered if the world had changed so much, if she might one day be allowed a partner, a family of her own…but such thoughts were premature and likely to end in disappointment. “Mama and Papa are grateful too, I'm sure. I've been hanging around like a shade for the past month.”

“It's nice to finally have my little sister around for a change! Are you sure you won't come to the Northcotes' ball with us? I do think you'd have fun.”

“Vini, you remember what happened the last time you convinced me to go to a party…”

“You had fun, is what happened. And Mama isn't around to spoil it this time.” Lavinia’s voice became wheedling. “Do say you'll come, Jules. Everyone's going to wear masks, like Orlesians, and there'll be dancing, and young men…”

“If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to use me to relive your unmarried youth.”

“And so what if I am? You missed out on so much.” She straightened the little one's bonnet. “You deserve a night out.”

Juliet had to admit that life outside the Circle had been lonely, especially at her parents’ estate - she had never been without the company of people her own age for so long. “I'm sure Mama wouldn't approve of you taking me out in polite society. Circle or no Circle, I'm still a mage! She'd be terrified of the scandal.”

“You're a mage?” Five-year-old Oscar had abandoned his soldiers and was staring wide-eyed at his aunt. “Did you do something very bad?”

She smiled indulgently. “Bad? What do you mean, Oscar?”

“Grandmother says bad children become mages.”

“I'm sure she didn't say that, Oscar.” Lavinia drew the boy to her side. “You must have
misunderstood.”

“Yes she did,” George piped up helpfully. “She says if we're bad we'll get turned into mages and the templars will take us away.”

“Are they going to take you away, Auntie Juliet?” Oscar's face crumpled. “Mama, I don't want them to. She's not bad, I like her!”

“I…” Juliet looked between her distraught nephew and her sister's mortified expression. “Nobody's taking me away.”

She said it with a confidence she didn't feel. Anything could happen at any time. The templars might be at the door tomorrow to take her back to the Circle, or somewhere much worse. Rumour had it that in Ferelden and Orlais, mages and templars were killing each other on sight - what was to keep the same chaos from spreading to the Free Marches?

And here she was wasting her freedom. Why? For the sake of her mother's social standing? Her feelings? Well fuck her feelings. Juliet was going to the ball.

She caught Lavinia’s eye and gave her a mischievous smirk. “I don't have anything to wear.”

Her sister was momentarily confused, then her face lit up as understanding dawned. “Oh!” She clapped her hands in delight. “Leave everything to me.”

“Lady Juliet Trevelyan.”

At the name Trevelyan heads swivelled, a low murmur of curiosity rippling through the ballroom.

No, that's wrong, she thought. I'm not a lady. I'm hardly even a Trevelyan. But the glances were admiring, and she recalled the glimpse of her reflection in the foyer - hair cascading in artful tendrils, her bare throat and shoulders velvet-smooth over the bodice that lifted her breasts in a way Lavinia assured her was fashionable without appearing brazen. And importantly, the enamelled mask, black and burgundy to match her dress, obscuring the top half of her face from view. It made her feel half-hidden, safe from scrutiny even with a dozen pairs of eyes still lingering on her.

“What are you going to tell people about me?” she had asked in the carriage.

“The truth.” Lavinia had shrugged. “You're my sister, here for a visit. What do you want me to tell them, if they ask for more?”

“Vini, I don't even know if harbouring a mage is still a crime. We need a story - I don't want to get you in trouble.”

“Fine,” her sister said blithely. “We'll say you were in the Chantry - it's more or less the truth.”

The girl in the mirror didn't look much like a lay sister, but Maker knew she'd had enough religious instruction in the Circle to convince a room full of drunken nobles. Juliet squared her shoulders, smiled a self-assured smile and descended the stairs.
The dancing hadn’t begun yet, but background music swirled down from the mezzanine where the orchestra was seated. The light of the many chandeliers caught on myriad jewels, worn at throats or sewn into bodices or skirts, or adorning masks both ostentatious and fantastical. There was a moment of uncertainty where Juliet paused, unsure of how to proceed, then at once she found herself surrounded.

“Lady Trevelyan, may I fetch you a drink?”

“Lady Trevelyan! Are you a relation of Bann Trevelyan?”

“What a marvellous dress, Lady Trevelyan - is your dressmaker local?”

“May I have the first dance, Lady Trevelyan?”

“Oh, I...yes, please.” To the drink or the dance or both, she wasn’t sure. “My sister’s dressmaker - Lavinia!” She caught her sister’s attention, hoping the widening of her eyes would be enough to signal her frantic need for help. “The lady here - I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name? Was enquiring about your dressmaker.” A young man with the visage of an emerald-coloured bird pressed a glass of wine into her hand, and she gratefully accepted. “Oh, you didn’t? I have been away for a long time. At a Chantry cloister, near…” Shit, where, where? “Ansburg. Yes, it is a long way from home; then again, my brother is stationed in Kirkwall so it could be worse. Yes, he’s safe - I know, those poor people.”

Fortunately, the nobility of Ostwick were as easily distracted as they were curious; on her second glass of wine and with a near-full dance card, Juliet drifted unmolested towards the buffet table.

“Avoid the ham.” The familiar voice was a little deeper than she remembered. “Trust me.”

Startling green eyes behind a wyvern mask, artfully tousled dark hair - he was a little taller, she thought, a touch broader than the last time they’d met. “Simon?”

“Juliet.” A ready smile, delighted that she’d recognised him. “I thought I was hearing things when they announced you - but here you are. Not even hiding in the garden.”

“Give it time,” she joked weakly. “Much more Ostwick hospitality and I might have run screaming.”

“They do love fresh meat.” Simon propped himself against a marble column, looking her up and down in a way that she might have considered lecherous if it didn’t make her skin shiver pleasurably. “And a beautiful, marriageable Trevelyan is always worth getting to know.”

The years hadn’t stripped away any of his confidence. She hoped the half-mask was enough to hide the flush on her cheeks. “I wouldn’t go that far.” She picked up a slice of an unfamiliar fruit.

“Beautiful, or marriageable?”

“Either.” She winced as her teeth closed on something hard and leathery, and Simon chuckled.

“You don’t eat that part. Here.” He took it from her and picked up a small silver knife, deftly carving away the soft fleshy fruit from the inedible rind. “What did they feed you in that Circle?”

“Oh, you know.” The rest of the fruit was sweet and slippery and she licked her fingertips clean of the sticky juice. “Sawdust, weevils, magebane…gruel on feastdays.”

“Truly,” he laughed. “I’d like to know more about it. About you.”
She shrugged. “There’s not much to tell.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

The orchestra struck up a new tune, and the dance floor began to clear. “I promised this dance to someone,” Juliet said. “I can’t quite remember who.”

“He’ll find you soon enough, I’m sure. I’m looking forward to seeing you dance.” Simon’s hand brushed her waist as he reached for a drink, casual but deliberate. “I’d like to know if you remember my lessons.”

“I remember everything.”

His eyes darkened and his mouth opened as if to speak, before a flamboyantly dressed lordling appeared at her side. “Lady Trevelyan? I believe I have this dance.”

“Of course.” She curtseyed to Simon, well aware of how the gesture exposed the curve of her bosom. “I trust we can continue this conversation later?”

“Count on it, my lady.” She caught his wry smile before she was whisked away onto the dance floor; the dance was new but familiar, the steps easy enough to follow.

“Do you know Lord de Hugues well, my lady?”

“Not well,” she answered distractedly. “He’s an old acquaintance. A relative by marriage, I suppose you’d say.” She executed a twirl, a half-step behind the other ladies but otherwise flawless - dancing wasn’t so difficult once one had the hang of it - and smiled winningly up at her partner. “Remind me of your name, ser?”

By the time a respite from dancing came Juliet was thirsty, footsore and utterly tired of small talk. Glass in hand she went looking for Simon, seeking a conversation without falsehoods and half-truths. And, if she was honest, to bask a while under that piercing green gaze.

“Juliet?” There was movement in a shadowed alcove, two masked faces peering out cautiously. “Is that you?”

“Petra? Erik?” She stepped out of the flow of partygoers and into the relative quiet of the alcove. “I haven’t seen anyone since...well. Have you been safe?”

“As safe as we can be.” Petra, a dour-faced senior enchanter, looked uncomfortably out of place in her rich gown. “Lord Northcote is a cousin of mine, I’ve been staying here since the Circle fell apart.”

Erik had been an outspoken loyalist - now he looked aged and defeated. “We left not long after you. You heard Lydia was killed?”

“Yes - just before I left.” She remembered the heavy tread of boots, the shouting, the blood. “I was told to flee.”

“It looked like it would be ugly for a while there,” Petra said. “They found the apprentice that did it and put her to the sword. Nobody objected - it was a pointless, evil act. I think some of the templars would have liked us to put up a fight so they had an excuse to do the same to the rest of us.”
“They wouldn’t,” Erik protested.

“They would. You’ve heard the same rumours I have - the slaughter at the White Spire, the Annulment in Dairsmuid, of all places!”

“That’s not here. We’ve been living alongside those templars all our lives - “

“Which means nothing. They were never our friends, Erik.”

It had the tone of an argument that had been rehashed many times over. Juliet broke in. “What happened after that?”

“Nothing.” Petra shrugged. “Everything was quiet. People just drifted off - nobody was stopping us. Classes weren’t held, meals weren’t cooked. Once the food gardens were stripped, there was no sense in staying.”

“All the books left unguarded,” Eric moaned. “The artifacts…”

“There were still templars there. But now they’ve split with the Chantry, who knows?” Petra spread her hands wide, a gesture of hopelessness. “Everything’s up in the air. Maker only knows where everyone else ended up. The ones without family, the elves. Have you been with your sister all this time?”

“No, I made my way to my parents’ estate.”

“Well if you could travel that far safely, that gives me hope for the others.”

*Safely* wasn't entirely accurate, but Juliet wouldn’t trouble the woman without cause. “Are we apostates, then? Does anyone know?”

“It’s not easy to make enquiries, obviously,” Erik sniffed. “But the short answer seems to be that there’s no official decree either way. We’re in limbo. If only we’d stayed in the Circle…”

“We’d have been starved out by now. Or killed by thugs, or templars, or each other.”

“Don’t be so dramatic - “

“Dairsmuid,” was all Petra said in return, and Erik fell silent. “You seem to have everyone charmed, Juliet. I always thought you were wasted in the Circle.” The senior enchanter eyed her speculatively. “There’s talk of a conclave in Ferelden, arranged by the Divine to broker peace. Ostwick Circle should be represented, if only we can find the right person. I don’t suppose - “

“There you are.” Simon appeared at her elbow. “Don't forget you promised me a dance.”

“Promised is a strong word.” Juliet caught a worried glance between the two mages. “Simon, these are friends from…”

“The Chantry?” He winked. “Rumours are flying about you, Lady Trevelyan.” He bowed to Petra and Erik. “I hope you don't mind if I steal Juliet away for a minute? I have a desperate need to partner her in the waltz.”

“Do I know the waltz?”

“You will soon.” He led her onto the floor and into a sweeping dance.

“What brings you to Ostwick again, Simon?”
“Business,” he replied vaguely. “I do a lot of travel between here and Wycome.” The fabric of his high-necked jacket was soft beneath her fingers, no doubt expensive. “You dance very gracefully, Lady Trevelyan.”

“I told you once before, I’m no lady.”

“Ah, but the world is changing. Today you’re free. Tomorrow you might have a title, inheritance.” His hand drifted an inch south. “Are you this graceful in all things?”

“I’ve had my share of compliments.” They whirled, and her fingers tightened on his shoulder. “Assuming we’re talking about the same thing.”

“Why, what are you talking about?”

“Needlepoint, of course. I hope you didn’t mean archery, because I’m awfully rusty at that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed that you find the time for needlepoint.”

“Well we have to amuse ourselves somehow - it can’t all be blood magic and rebellion, as enjoyable as that sounds.”

Simon shook his head, grinning. “You’re a strange woman.”

“That’s why they locked me up.” She wasn’t sure if she’d meant it as a joke; either way it fell flat, and they both fell silent.

“Did we do this last time?” he asked eventually. “I can’t recall.”

“This dance? I remember your hand on my waist.”

He pressed closer, their cheeks almost touching. “I remember my hands other places.”

“I would have let you do more.”

“I know.” His thumb circled her hipbone, pressed just hard enough to make her gasp. “Is it too late?”

The music, the swirl of dancers around them, all was incidental - there was just the intensity of his green eyes, the steady pressure of his hands. On her bare shoulder, the warmth of his fingers seemed to sear through his soft gloves to her skin.

“We’re here now.” She brushed up against him; to an onlooker it might have seemed accidental, a misstep in the dance. “What did you have in mind?”

The song came to an end and abruptly he pulled her from the dance floor. “Quick, before one of these fools tries to steal you away.” Leading her by the elbow he weaved through the crowd, down a flight of stairs and through double glass doors to the garden.

“Simon,” she began but she was interrupted by his mouth on hers, his body pressing hers into the wall.

“Juliet.” Shaking fingers worked at the ties of her mask. “Let me see you.” The night air was cool on her bare face and he seemed to drink in the sight of her, his hands gently cupping her neck.

“Maker, but you’re as beautiful as I remember.” He kissed her again gently, carefully as though she might crumble into dust. “Did you think about me too?”
She had for a time after their first ill-fated meeting, touching herself surreptitiously beneath the blankets until her breath hitched and her toes curled. Long after the details of his face had faded from memory she could still recall the touch of his hands, the feel of his lips. Until she found new hands, new lips to occupy her thoughts and time. Nevertheless, thinking of it now sent a warm pulse to her groin - or perhaps it was his thigh, pressing insistently between her legs.

“Find us somewhere more private, and I'll show you what I thought of.” She returned the kiss, sucking his lower lip into her mouth.

“I have to tell you something,” he groaned when she released him. “I'm engaged.”

“Well you could have told me that before I let you kiss me.” She pushed him to arms’ length.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to lead you on - “

“Lead me on?” Juliet laughed. “What did you think, that I thought you were going to marry me? I don't like the thought of you being unfaithful with me, that's all.”

He looked equal parts wounded and relieved. “I don't know her,” he said. “We haven't met yet - she's from Nevarra. Rich as a magister and probably twice as ugly.”

“You don't know that.”

“I know she's rich, that's the whole reason my parents are pushing me into it. As for ugly, well…” He shrugged. “There must be some reason her family are so eager to get rid of her.”

That stung more than she wished him to know. “You'd be surprised,” she said, trying to keep the bitterness from her voice, “how little reason some people need.”

His jaw dropped. Then he was pulling his own mask free, his face pressed to hers. “I'm sorry, I didn't think before I - that was a stupid thing to say. Forgive me.” Gloves off, he traced his thumbs over her cheekbones. “They didn't give you up, Juliet. However they might act when they're afraid, you're still their daughter.”

If only that were true - peel away the layers of shame and recrimination, fear and resentment and she wasn't sure there would be anything left. “We didn't come out here to talk about the Trevelyans,” she grumbled, then her voice turned breathy as she canted her hips against his. “Take me somewhere, Simon. Touch me like you've thought about all this time.”

He nodded, his eyes gone dark with need.

Outside the circle of light spilling from the house they found a nook, a shadowed space between a wall and a fountain just large enough for the two of them to stand, hidden from view by a wild tangle of jasmine.

“I didn't come here for business,” he confessed, his hand sliding up the inside of her thigh.

“Why, then?” She tilted her head to allow access to his roaming lips, moaning her approval when his teeth scraped the tendon at the side of her neck.

“Your sister told me you might be here.”

“I'll kill h- Ohhhh.” He had reached the apex of her thighs and was rubbing his fingers along her clothed slit, the pad of his thumb circling just so. “I told her not - Simon!” A single long finger pushed aside her lacy smallclothes and penetrated her folds.
“Do you wish I hadn’t come?” She whimpered and he laughed, a soft huff of warmth against her ear. “Want me to stop?”

“N-no.” He rocked her on two fingers now, his other hand massaging her breast as well as he could through the stiff bodice.

“Juliet.” The low timbre of his voice went straight to her cunt and she shivered against him. “You feel even sweeter than I’d imagined.”

“Faster.” She ground into the movement of his hand, chasing her end, but he denied her.

“There’s no rush. We can take our time.” He kissed her and she let their tongues slide together, echoing the slide of his fingers in her warm sheath. “I want you to come slowly for me. I want to feel it build, and then feel you come all tight and wet around my fingers. Can you do that for me, Juliet?”

“Yes, Maker yes. Just...please!”

“Shh.” His knuckles brushed her clit and she would have doubled over if not for his body pinning her to the wall. “Slowly.”

When it did come she felt her orgasm rising like a tide, his fingers finally thrusting hard inside her and his thumb pressing into the slick flesh above her sex until her vision went fuzzy around the edges, his hungry mouth swallowing her cry.

“How was it?” he breathed against her neck and she clung tight around his shoulders.

“Fuck me now.”

“Now?” he echoed. “Don’t you need...?”

“Now,” she insisted. Impatient, she reached beneath her skirts to pull her smallclothes down properly, one booted foot bracing against the lip of the fountain. “Not slow.”

He freed his cock from the confines of his trousers and thrust into her with a groan. “Are you sure this is how you -”

“Simon,” she gasped. “We're outside, stuck between a wall and a fountain with our clothes still on. This is the only way there is. Now go.”

The garden stayed mercifully empty - anyone about couldn't have failed to hear the impact of his skin against hers over the burbling of the fountain, the soft animal cries of their coupling.

Yes. Her head fell to his shoulder, the old habit of quiet winning over.

Right there.

They moved in frantic unison, his hands gripping her hips hard enough to bruise in the effort to keep her anchored.

“Turn around,” he growled in frustration.

“Give me a second.” Disentangling her leg from around his hip she turned to face the wall, resting her forehead on the cool stone. There was a rustle of fabric before she felt him nudge her legs further apart, then he slid back into her with a low moan of relief.

“Still want it fast?” Each thrust pushed her onto her toes, rattled her teeth. She didn't answer in words, just ground back against him. “Hard. So you don't - have - time - to care. Is that it - Juliet?”

His last drive into her tore his name from her lips, a shudder of rapture running through her body.
Release, relief. Her surroundings trickled back into her awareness - the flow of water, the scent of jasmine. He slipped from her and she felt empty.

She waited as he turned away, bringing himself to his own quick finish. “Don't do that,” she said quietly. “Don't try to tell me what I'm thinking.” She smoothed her disordered skirts and plucked a jasmine blossom from between her breasts. “I should go back inside, my sister will wonder where I've gone.” More likely Lavinia would know exactly where she was, imagining the kind of moonlit love scene one might find in one of the more salacious Tethras novels.

“I'm sorry.” Would he never stop apologising? “It was just talk.”

“Forget it. You're probably right, but it's still none of your fucking business.” Unaccountably weary, she turned back towards the party.

“Juliet,” he called. “I have rooms at the Whale and Anchor. I don't have to go home for some time. If you need…anything.”

She managed a smile. “I'll bear that in mind, Lord de Hugues.”

It was a quiet afternoon on the estate. Sunshine streamed in through the large windows. A lone fly buzzed through the room, and one of Drakon’s grandsons lifted his head to idly snap at it as it passed.

“Please, Jules, go easy on my poor wife.” Alec lounged by the window, keeping half an eye on their chess game. “I swear, Melinda, she used to be dreadful at chess - I would never have subjected you to this if I knew.”

“When I was seven, you mean?” Alec's wife really was charming. And petite, even in her advanced stage of pregnancy, and pretty. And she had absolutely no head for strategy. “I've had plenty of time on my hands to practice since then.”

Melinda smiled shyly. “I don't mind. I'm learning.” Hesitantly she picked up her knight and nudged aside Juliet’s queen. “Is that allowed?”

Perhaps some head for strategy, then. “It's lucky you're not a betting man, brother - this game isn't over yet.”

“Juliet?” Her mother appeared at the door, her face pinched and disapproving. She seemed to dislike Juliet spending time around Melinda, probably concerned that magic would taint the unborn baby. “There are…people…here to see you.”

“To see me?” It couldn't be the templars, Mama didn't look nearly pleased enough. Somebody unsuitable…Jed and his mercenaries? “I'll be right down.”

“Please do.” Rather than leaving her mother hovered in the doorway, arms crossed over her ample bosom. “I will wait for you.”

Very unsuitable. With an apologetic nod to her sister-in-law, Juliet rose from the table.

“Who is it, Mama?” She followed her mother’s broad back down the stairs, the hound padding
behind. “Did they give you their names?”

“In here.” Clara ushered her into the downstairs sitting room, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

“Juliet.” Petra rose from her chair - her ballgown had been replaced by a dark robe that practically screamed mage. No wonder her mother was put out.

“Petra.” Juliet's eyes fell on the woman seated next to her and she found herself gaping. “Grand Enchanter?”

“Former Grand Enchanter.” The grandmotherly woman offered a nod of recognition. “I can claim no rank without a Circle to govern, and I'm afraid ours has fallen along with the rest. I am sorry to trouble you at your home, Enchanter Trevelyan.” Her gaze flickered to Lady Trevelyan.

“Don't mind Mama. She can't see two mages in the same room without assuming we're plotting to blow up a Chantry somewhere.”

“Juliet!” Her mother glared. “That joke is in poor taste even for you!”

“I didn't think I was joking,” she muttered. “Will you leave us, Mama?”

“I will not. If you want to conspire under my roof I will hear what you have to say.” Her scowl encompassed all three of them - Bann Trevelyan’s wife held no deference for the rank of Grand Enchanter, former or otherwise.

For her part, the Grand Enchanter merely raised an eyebrow. "Petra?"

“The Divine's conclave is going ahead,” Petra explained in a rush. “Next month, in Ferelden. At the Temple of Sacred Ashes." She fell silent, shifting from foot to foot.

“The mages of Ostwick must be represented.” The tiny old woman crossed her gnarled hands daintily in her lap. “Enchanter Trevelyan, if you are willing we'd like you to be our envoy.”

“Why you?” Sprawled naked on the bed, Simon watched as she rose to fetch a glass of wine.

“The Grand Enchanter is too frail to travel. And they hope my family name might hold some weight.” She looked out over the city - the red rooftops bathed in afternoon sun, the double walls dotted with arrow-loops. Beyond, the ocean sparkled. “And offer some protection.”

“You need protection?”

“I'm a mage,” she reminded him. “And Ferelden’s in the grip of a war. But I doubt any templars will stop and ask my name, if I'm honest.”

Simon sat up. “Should I be concerned?”

“I'm not defenceless. And the conclave is under a truce.” Juliet drained her wine. “But yes, you probably should.”
“And your parents are happy with this?”

“Happy? To rid themselves of an apostate daughter? They paid my passage.” She allowed herself a small, unhappy smile. “The last time I saw them so happy to see the back of me I was being carried away by templars.”

No need to mention the final bitter row. Her mother calling her an ingrate, a disgrace, a blight on the family, her father hovering anxiously in the background. And finally it had all come pouring out in a relentless tide of rage, the years of resentment and swallowed insults.

The only part she could truly regret was calling her father a coward - perhaps there was truth in it but he'd looked so old in that moment, so broken. Tears in his eyes that she hadn't seen since she was a child of seven; then again she'd barely seen him since she was seven, and whose fault was that? They could have visited.

Juliet stretched, knots of tension in her spine that would need more than an afternoon rolling in bed to fix. She linked her hands behind her back, arching until she felt a satisfying crack.

“You're not shy about your body, are you?”

Jolted out of her thoughts, she saw Simon eyeing her appreciatively. “Should I be?” She padded slowly towards him. “There's not a lot of privacy in the Circle.”

“You definitely should not be.” He lay back in the sheets as she draped herself over him, hands running lightly over her bare back. “You're a work of art.”

She laughed. “You're not so bad yourself. Fancy a journey to Ferelden?”

“I can't,” he said regretfully. “I'll be married by the time you come back.”

*If I come back.* Juliet brushed her knuckles over his thigh, feeling the muscles beneath his skin twitch. “Give her a chance, won't you? I know what it's like to have to leave everything behind.”

“I will.” He reached up to kiss her lips. “Now can we stop talking about her? I want to think about you.”

“That's fair, I suppose.” She rose to straddle him, his cock bumping against her curls. “Slowly, this time?”

“However you want it.” He watched her with a lazy smile, his eyes devouring her body.

“Slowly,” she confirmed, positioning herself over him and sinking down just an inch. “We have time.”

“Until tomorrow.” His head fell back on the pillows, both their bodies trembling. Tomorrow was the ship, and then Ferelden, and the conclave. After that…who knew?

“Forget tomorrow.” Finally he was resting inside her, and she began to ever so slowly rock against him, a slow fire kindling between her thighs. “We don't need tomorrow when we have tonight.”

Her eyes fluttered shut, lip caught between her teeth in concentration. His hands reached to cup her breasts and roll her nipples gently between his fingers.

"You've never done this before, have you?" he asked.

"You know that's not true."
"I don't mean sex. Going slow. Letting yourself feel it."

"Time isn't a luxury we can afford in the Circle." This was nice though, she had to admit. No robes to fumble with, no straining for the sound of approaching footsteps. "It's more or less get off then get going before you're caught."

"I noticed," he laughed. "Fucking you's like a race to the finish."

"Not tonight." Tonight she rose and fell like the tide, letting herself feel every stretch, every inch of him dragging inside her, every sweet ache remaining from their previous exertions.

"Fuck," he gasped, his fingers tightening. "Juliet, I wish -"

"No." Her nails dug lightly into his chest. "No wishes. This is what we have right now."

And it was as close to perfect as she had ever dreamed of.
Alistair makes his feelings known.

*Southern Ferelden, 9:30 Dragon Age*

Alone, she stood on a solitary limestone outcrop, fighting an invisible enemy.

The sword sang to Solona as it cut through the night air. It sang of honour and victory, fire and ice, blood and steel and lyrium and it brought a fierce grin to her face, the heat of battle raging in her veins.

“You're getting good with that.”

She froze mid-swing. “I didn't hear you coming.”

“That's me,” Alistair quipped. “Stealthy. You don't have to stop on my account, you know.”

“I know.” Letting the sword fall to her side, she subtly flexed strained muscles. “I just feel silly practising in front of you.”

“But you train with Zevran.” He crossed his arms. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” There was a quality to him that was more than just his usual awkwardness, like he was building up his courage for something; she wondered what it was.

“You and him…”

“Zevran?” This was the conversation she'd dreaded having with any of her companions. They'd been discreet, she thought, but travelling and sleeping in such close quarters a secret couldn't be kept forever.

“Are the two of you serious?”

Chewing her lip, Solona considered the question. Was he asking if they'd slept together? “What would you call serious?”

“I guess I'm asking if…” Alistair scratched the back of his head, then continued in a rush. “Do you love him?”

“Oh, that. Probably not.” It was as well they were far from camp - Maker knew this conversation was awkward enough without an audience. “It's not something he wants. Or me. It's, you know…” She shrugged. “Sex.”

He laughed nervously. “I don't know if I should be relieved to hear that, but I think I am.”

“Why, are you afraid he's going to hurt me? Even if I thought he'd try -”
“That's not it,” he blurted. “It's that, well, I care about you.”

“I'll be fine, Alistair.”

“No.” He stepped closer. “I mean I care about you.”

Her mouth went dry.

“Solona?” His brows knit together. “I'm sorry to drop this on you, I just… I needed to know if there was a chance that maybe you felt the same. That I wasn't fooling myself.”

“Alistair, I…” She swallowed. “I care about you, too -”

The sword still dangled at her side when he closed the distance and kissed her - it was tentative, almost chaste but for the way he cupped the nape of her neck to tilt her face towards his, the way his lips lingered full and soft. Unexpected warmth blossomed in her chest and she found herself blindly seeking the contact, lips parting a fraction, driven by an impulse she couldn't explain.

“Was that too soon?” He released her suddenly, leaving her breathless and off balance. His amber eyes searched her face and reflected in them was all the confusion she herself felt.

It was easier with Zevran. He was so confident of what he wanted, so assured that she wanted it too that it became clear to her as well. This… this felt like falling, like the jolt of losing one's footing and lurching forward into the unknown.

“I don't know.”

There was something almost mournful in his expression. “I didn't mean to make things difficult for you. I just… heading back to Ostagar, it makes me think about everything we've been through, and…” He ran a hand over his face as if to clear his mind. “I don't know what came over me. I'll leave you alone.”

“Alistair…” Frozen in place, she watched him trudge back towards camp.

She eyed Zevran's back in the dim light of the tent. It was chilly, their shared blanket was thin and she felt the urge to bridge the gap between them and curl up to his warm body. He was always warm to the touch, as if he carried the sun of Antiva beneath his skin.

She went as far as reaching towards him before her hand fell back to the mattress. Not half an hour since they'd fucked and here she was, afraid of crossing a line by simply touching him.

“Something troubling you, my warden?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. Growing up in dormitories, she thought she was a good judge of whether someone was asleep, but of course if anyone could fool her it would be Zevran.

It's cold, is what she should have said. Instead she blurted, “What are we to each other, exactly?”

There was silence, punctuated only by his steady breathing. Then, “We? As in, you and I?”

“Who else would I mean, Zevran?”
He shrugged, one-shouldered. “What do you wish us to be?”

She felt a prickle of irritation. “I'm not having this conversation with your back.”

“It can wait until morning then.” He tugged the blanket up over his shoulder.

“Alistair kissed me.”

Again, the steady breathing of one asleep.

“I know you're awake.”

“What do you want me to say?” He rolled onto his back, still not looking at her. “You wish me to fly into a jealous rage? Beg you to choose me? What?”

“I don't know,” she snapped. “Anything but what you're doing now would be a good start.”

“Doing? I am trying to sleep.” Angrily he rearranged the pillow beneath his head. “First you want nothing from me. Then you tell me this. Why?”

“You don't think it's something that you should know? Me kissing another man?”

“He kissed you. You kissed him. Which is it?”

“Do you even care?” she said childishly. “I thought you didn't want to know.”

“You are right.” He turned his back to her again. “I do not.”

It shouldn't be this hard - hadn't they meant this to be simple, uncomplicated by feelings? She couldn't trace back to when things had gotten so messy between them. Before tonight's encounter with Alistair, certainly. Just sex, but in between were these silences they couldn't seem to break without fear of crossing some invisible boundary between them.

Now here they were, both bristling with hurt and anger and she was still fucking cold.

“I think you should go,” she said.

Finally he turned to look at her, propping himself up on his elbows. “You wish me to leave?” he asked incredulously.

“Not the company. Just my tent.”

Zevran's lip curled. “As you wish, my warden.” He began to pull on his underclothes. “I will not trouble you further.”

She'd made things worse, if that were possible. Should she ask him to stay? The words stuck in her throat, the resentment still simmering in her belly.

He paused at the tent flap, still half-dressed with his leathers tucked beneath his arm. “Solona, I…”

“Just go,” she said wearily. “You sleep better alone, don't you?”
Ostagar, 9:30 Dragon Age

It had, as Wynne said, been a long day, and she felt its ache in her soul as much as her body. Right now the frozen wasteland that was Ostagar seemed to embody every loss, every crushed hope since her journey began. She sniffed the end of her braid and grimaced - her clothes and hair smelled of the smoke from Cailan's pyre, and if that wasn't a metaphor for her life at this moment, she didn't know what was.

Digging deep in her pack she found a clean shirt - it had once been Alistair’s and was over long, but would suffice for sleeping. She had just finished folding away her drakeskin leathers - habits of neatness instilled in the Circle died hard - when she heard the soft sound of someone clearing their throat.

“Who is it?” Maker, even her voice was smoky.

“Alistair.”

“Just a second.” She swung her bare legs under the blanket. “Come in.”

The tent seemed instantly much smaller when Alistair’s head and shoulders emerged through the flap. “Hi.”

“Did Wynne kick you out already?” she joked, shuffling aside to make room.

“Wynne?” he asked, confused. “Oh, that.” His boyish features went pink with embarrassment.

“Well, she's with Sten - I mean up talking, with Sten. Not that if she wasn't, I would be…well. It looked so bright and welcoming in here from outside.”

Solona looked up at the dancing spirit lights above his head. “They don't bother you?”

He snorted. “We waded through a nest of darkspawn and giant spiders and fought a reanimated ogre, and you're asking me if I'm afraid of a few magical lights?”

“When you put it like that...” She smiled, patting the canvas floor beside her bedroll.

He sat stiffly, both of them acutely aware of their forced proximity. “What a day,” he sighed.

“I know.” She put a tentative hand on his knee. “I'm sorry about Cailan. I barely met him, but he was...kind.”

“I didn't know him much better than you, really.”

“But he was your brother.”

“I suppose he was. My brother.” He drew out the word, testing it.

“You know…I couldn't even say. Duncan knew, and I think Loghain knew, so I suppose he must have.” Alistair looked down at her hand, still sitting on his knee, and she realised with a start that she'd been stroking her thumb absent-mindedly back and forth. “If I'd known what was coming, maybe I would have - “

“If we'd known what was coming, lots of things would be different.”

“But it brought us here, didn't it?” His bigger hand closed over hers, warm and rough with
callouses.

Her pulse was beating hard; she wondered if he could feel it through her hand. “Is that a good thing?”

“I don't know.” Alistair turned his head to look in her eyes and she almost had to look away from the sorrowful intensity of his gaze. “Is it?”

“If you mean the journey to bring us here, there are things I'd change.” Solona bit thoughtfully at her bottom lip. “But if you mean the two of us here, now…it's nice, I guess.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, his blush returning. “So…would I ruin it if I kissed you again?”

There were a thousand reasons why they shouldn't. Her gaze fell to his full lips, moistened by the tip of his tongue. How weak was she, that all rational thought could be driven out by a surge of selfish need? There was no conceivable future for them, and the transient comfort of the here and now would never be enough for the man beside her. But she wanted it, wanted it so badly that it ached…

Cowardly, she closed her eyes and waited. And soon enough there was the tentative press of his lips on hers. She sighed at the first enquiring flicker of his tongue, parting her lips to allow him access. Rough fingertips brushed her ear, her neck, travelling lower as the kiss deepened. The oversized shirt slipped from her shoulder and Alistair breathed out a low moan as his hand rested on the curve of her breast, breaking the kiss to rest his head in the hollow of her neck.

“I'm sorry,” he panted. “I just…” His shoulders were shaking, she realised, and hot tears kissed her bare skin. She wrapped her arms around his back.

“Hush,” she murmured. The day had taken enough of a toll on her - for Alistair, finding Duncan's discarded weapons, Cailan's desecrated body...after her return to Kinloch Hold, she could imagine all too well how he must be feeling. “You're allowed to have feelings. Morrigan’s not here, and I won't tell Sten.”

Alistair gave a reluctant snort of laughter, followed by a sniff. “It's all part of my plan, you know. To seduce you by weeping all over you like a baby.”

“Come here then, you big baby.” Solona settled back against the pillows, cradling his head in her lap and trying not to think about her lack of smallclothes. It didn't help that when she stroked his hair he nuzzled into her thigh, sending a spreading warmth through her veins.

“I wish I weren't Maric’s son,” he mused. “And we weren't Grey Wardens. We could run away together.”

“That would make me an apostate,” she reminded him gently. “And if you weren't a warden, you'd be a templar by now.”

He gave a low grumble of protest. “Can't we just be you and I, for once?”

“I'm not sure that's how it works,” she replied, and he glanced up at the weary sadness in her voice.

“I love you,” he said with conviction. “I won't go without saying it, when we don't know what might happen next.”

Her hand stilled in his hair. “That's all the more reason not to say it.”
“No,” he said obstinately. “I've lost people who were important to me, and I missed the chance to know them better. I'm not doing that with you.” His fingers found the top of the blanket. “Wait…is this my shirt?”

“It was. I ended up with it after Flemeth rescued us, and then…” She shrugged. “It was just comfortable.”

“You sneaky shirt thief.” Alistair felt the soft fabric between thumb and forefinger, the movement gently tickling her ribcage. “It looks better on you, anyhow.” Once more, he rubbed his cheek against her lap, and his warm hand fell to her hip. The shirt had never felt so thin. “Solona…”

“I can't give you what you want, Alistair.” The more she tried to breathe naturally, the more unnatural it felt.

“What do I want?” His fingers tightened on the curve of her hip, his lips twitching upwards at her sharp intake of breath.

“Love,” she replied. “Promises. You'd want all of me, and I can't offer you that. I wish I could.”

“I do want that.” His hand slipped beneath the blanket, strong fingers encircling her ankle, squeezing lightly at her calf. “Why not?”

“You'll be king, and I'll be -” A warden, wandering the Deep Roads until her inevitable death? Back in the Tower under the renewed suspicion of Cullen and his templar colleagues? Or somewhere else entirely… “Gone.”

“I don't have to be king,” he muttered. “I'd be better as a warden. We could stay together…”

“That's a dream, Alistair,” she said sharply, heedless of his pout. “Even if you didn't have a duty to Ferelden, we don't know where life will take us. Do you want to throw yourself into something that will end in heartbreak?”

“I want to throw myself into you,” he said obstinately. “I mean - that didn't sound right. I want you. Whatever comes.” He fondled her knee now, and she felt her resolve slipping as his fingers inched up her thigh, drawing the shirt hem with them. “I just want to make you happy.”

Day-old beard growth scratched her leg, his lips brushing the inside of her knee. When he looked up at her his pupils were blown wide with desire. “Let me make you happy.”

Weak. She could turn down the promises of demons with hardly a second thought, yet when he bent to kiss her cunt she yielded fully, her thighs parting to the cautious sweep of his tongue. She felt his moan of appreciation as his mouth explored her centre, looking down to see his amber eyes glittering up at her before he returned his full attention to mapping her contours, teasing and tasting. She couldn't breathe but in tiny gasps, her fingers gripping the blankets, his tunic, anything for purchase.

Too much, too fast, with Alistair she could never explain this away as two grieving, broken people seeking comfort, it would have to mean more. It did mean more, it meant everything, everything… lust, and love, and friendship, and comfort, and white hot need, tangled together until she couldn't unravel the threads if she'd wanted to.

And now she was coming hard, his firm hands pinning her down as he drank in her every shiver and twitch, mouth curved in a deserved smile of self-satisfaction. She bit her knuckle but it didn't drown out the sound that emerged from deep in her throat, plaintive and wanton, or the desperate gasping for air that followed, the whimper of protest when his wet, wondrous mouth finally left
“Wow,” she heard him whisper, rubbing calming circles on the soft skin of her belly. “Did I do that?” He rested his head on her hip, seemingly reluctant to leave behind the heat between her legs. She found herself stroking his hair again, needing to keep touching him, keep him from slipping away.

“Did you like that?” she asked.

“Like it? I'd be happy to do nothing else. I mean, obviously I'd like to do other things, but that -” he kissed the damp inside of her thigh. “That was special.” A note of worry crept into his voice. “Did you? I've never done anything like that before. To be honest, I was making it up as I went along. It wasn't uncomfortable, or annoying, or boring...?”

“Alistair,” she chided. “Did I seem bored to you?”

Contentment crept back over his face. “No,” he said proudly. He shifted, pulling her shirt down and covering her with the blanket before laying his head on her shoulder. “Do you mind if I stay? It's just Wynne and Sten, and they'll probably disapprove, but…”

“Let them.” With a lazy wave of her hand, she dismissed the glowing lights around them. “First smart remark and I'll feed them to the darkspawn.”

“I think we killed them all.”

“It's a Blight. There'll be more.” Drifting in the lead-limbed afterglow of her orgasm, she felt sleep creeping in.

“See?” she heard as if from a long way off. ”This is why I love you.”

Don't, she thought, before exhaustion took her.
Cullen (word of an apostate)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kirkwall, 9:31 Dragon Age

Amell.

Cullen hadn’t thought to hear it again after leaving Ferelden, but his enquiries into the Hawke sisters kept turning up that name - a name that was once one of the most honoured in Kirkwall, now tainted by shame and disrepute. The women’s mother had been a daughter of that house, the rumours went, before eloping with an apostate to Ferelden.

He couldn’t see much resemblance in the sharp-featured, sharp-tongued elder sister. She was either the templar order’s greatest ally in the city, or a thorn in their side, and he was having trouble deciding which - perhaps both? Certainly she was willing enough to help; she could go places templars could not, loosen the tongues of those who would have slammed the door in the Knight-Captain’s face, and she had valuable allies and fighting skills that were beyond impressive. Still, her father had been an apostate and she openly flaunted her disregard for authority.

“I’ve been hearing interesting things about your sister, Hawke,” he’d remarked to her one day in the Gallows courtyard. “I hope they’re not true.”

There had been a flash of something in her eyes then, hidden as quickly as it came. That moment more than anything had convinced him that she would be a formidable enemy if crossed. She’d deflected smoothly. "Keep an ear out for rumours about me instead, Cullen - they're likely to be far more accurate, and far more interesting."

Bethany, for her part, was remarkably inoffensive, as long as one could ignore the distracting expanse of her tanned bosom. She reminded him more of Solona: there was a softness, a shyness about her that contrasted sharply with her sister’s brash nature.

He hadn’t exchanged so much as a handful of words with her before the day Meredith called him to her office. Despite his seniority, that ice-blue glare could still make his blood run cold. “Knight-Captain. We have word of an apostate hiding in Lowtown.” Meredith preferred to stand rather than sit behind her desk, the better to look down her nose at the unfortunate target of her scrutiny.

“Do you have the address? I will dispatch a team at once.”

“I would prefer you dealt with this personally, Cullen.”

Rigid discipline allowed him to keep the distaste from his expression. Bringing in apostates was thankfully beneath his station most of the time; it wasn’t the potential for danger he disliked, but the displays of emotion - grief, anger, despair, as mages were often dragged away from their weeping families. Cullen took satisfaction in removing mages from the streets of Kirkwall, but he was not one to revel in their suffering.

“Very well, Knight-Commander. Do we have the name of this mage?”

“Bethany Hawke,” she rasped, and his heart sank. Those shrewd eyes searched his face for a
reaction. “It seems to be somewhat of an open secret that Mistress Hawke was suspected of magic. May I ask, Cullen, what has taken us so long in apprehending her?”

“They were mere rumours, Knight-Commander.”

“Rumours,” she spat, “are to be investigated. Rumours are what allow us to track down and apprehend dangerous apostates before they can harm the people of Kirkwall, or have you forgotten your job?”

“I have not.” Indignance and shame warred within him - he could not honestly tell himself that her name had not protected her from his attentions, and not the name Hawke, but the other, secret name that gnawed at his consciousness. “The elder Hawke has been a valuable ally this past year -”

“Alyse Hawke ventured into the Deep Roads over a month ago. We have no reason to believe that she will return, and even if we did we cannot make exceptions. If this lapse of duty is borne of some misplaced sense of Ferelden solidarity -”

“Certainly not!”

“Do not presume to interrupt me, Knight-Captain! You will take two men to Lowtown and apprehend the apostate, at once. Once this is carried out to my satisfaction we will discuss your motivations in failing to follow through with this earlier. At length.”

There was not a word he could say in his defence. Cullen stood straight, his feet planted apart and jaw firm. “Yes Ser, Knight-Commander. And the family?”

“It is as you say: the Hawke family have provided the templars with valuable help. Although…” She left the thought unfinished. “If they cooperate there should be no need to make an example. If not, well…” Meredith’s eyes were not so much creased as narrowed by her cold smile. “You know what protocol demands.”

“Indeed.”

“Dismissed. And Cullen - you have been granted seniority beyond your years. Don’t let the order’s faith in you be misplaced.”

It was approaching evening, typically muggy but without the added torment of the Kirkwall sun. The sea breeze provided further respite as the ferry rocked towards Lowtown.

“Have you seen this ‘Awke?’” the older of his subordinates said. “They say she’s got…” He gestured to his chest, the movement of his hand making his meaning clear.

“I’ve seen the other,” the younger templar said wistfully. “Curves like a bloody vase, she’s got. Any chance she’s a mage too, Ser Cullen?”

“You forget yourselves,” he snapped. “We go to apprehend an apostate, not to provide the two of you with distractions it seems you can ill-afford.”

“Yes, Ser Cullen,” and “As you say, Ser Cullen,” they muttered. The remainder of the journey was
conducted in uneasy silence, Cullen’s fingers gripping the rail with a force that would have his knuckles white beneath his heavy gauntlets.

“This is the place, Ser,” the older man said when they reached their destination. It seemed an inauspicious dwelling for the Hawke sisters, little more than a hovel - no, a hovel in truth, neglect evident in the way the door almost hung from its hinges, the stairs smelling of cat piss. At some point recently flowers had been planted in a pot, only to be torn out and scattered by bored urchins.

“Wait out here,” he ordered the older templar. “Make sure there’s no trouble.” As an afterthought he removed his helmet, flattening his curls into some semblance of dignity - it might be less of an ordeal if she were confronted with a familiar face.

His knock drew a menacing growl from behind the door, and the men’s hands tightened on their sword pommels. There was grumbling, a muttered, “Get back, you bloody mutt,” and the door opened a crack to reveal a grizzled, suspicious face.

Gamlen Amell, Leandra’s ne’er-do-well brother and the last of the line to go by that name. There was a weary resignation in his eyes as he looked the templars up and down. “What d’you want?” he demanded, as if he didn’t already know.

“We’re here to see Mistress Bethany.”

“She expecting you? I don’t know if she’s home.”

Doubtful in a place that size. “I’d urge you to cooperate, Serah.”

“Serah, is it?” He snorted. “Can’t say anyone’s called me that in years.”

“Uncle.” Her gentle voice came from somewhere behind him, wavering just slightly. “Let them in.”

The man glowered, but the door eased open. If anything the interior of the hovel was more dismal than the outside, dark and musty, the floor strewn with stale rushes. Adjusting to the dim light, Cullen saw the source of the growling was an impressive specimen of a Mabari hound, brindle and pacing suspiciously until Bethany called it to her side. An older woman who must be Leandra lingered behind them, hands pressed to her mouth and hunched over as though she’d been punched in the belly. It was an all too familiar sight, the parent who had convinced themselver their child was safe until the day he came knocking.

Then there was her. The conversation on the boat came back to him and it was an effort to keep his eyes from straying to her chest; then instead he looked at her face and that was worse, seeking and finding traces of Solona in her mouth, her chin, her wide eyes that were brown instead of grey.

“Mistress Hawke.” He inclined his head. “And your mother, I presume…?”

“Yes.” Her mouth was pinched with fear, but to her credit she held her head high. “Mother, this is Knight-Captain Cullen.”

Leandra merely shook her head.

“You know why we are here,” he said bluntly. “I must ask you to come with us. It would be wise to cooperate.”

“Of course.” She looked around, dazed. “May I have a moment to fetch a few things…?”
“I’m afraid not. Everything you need will be provided when you arrive at the Circle. You may take a moment to say goodbye.”

The young woman nodded. She first gave her uncle a swift peck on the cheek, while the man glared blearily at Cullen, then knelt to scratch the Mabari behind the ears as the beast panted with unease. It was a heartfelt gesture, but it also gave her time to steel herself before turning to her mother.

“No…” Leandra moaned. “Not you too. I can’t bear it.”

“You can, mother.” Bethany wrapped her arms around the frail woman’s shoulders. “Be strong for me. Alyse will be home soon, I’m sure of it.”

She could not know how right she was - at that moment there was a commotion outside, voices raised before the door swung open. Cullen glared at his subordinate, and the man shrugged.

“You said make sure there’s no trouble, Ser. Seemed less trouble to let her in.”

Hawke looked a little ragged around the edges, pale as you would expect from a person who’d emerged from weeks underground. But she still moved lightly, dangerously, her eyes narrowed on Cullen. “What’s going on?”

“Please don’t do anything.” It was Bethany who spoke, a plea in her voice that Hawke chose to respect for the moment. The older sister’s eyes remained on Cullen, sharp as razors.

"If your man keeps pointing that crossbow at my dog, he's going to lose his trigger finger."

The templar shifted uneasily. "There's no way it could move that f-"

Hawke didn't shift her gaze. "I didn't say you'd lose it to the dog."

He was within his rights, Cullen reminded himself. Taking in mages was his duty, and he would not be cowed or made to feel guilty. “Mistress Bethany is being taken to the Circle of Magi in the Gallows.”

“A little tour is fine, but this better not be permanent.” He knew from experience, humour from Hawke was no guarantee of safety. Luckily for him, Bethany spoke again.

“Of course it’s permanent.” Hawke glared at her, and she shook her head. “It had to happen eventually, didn’t it?”

“Consider yourselves fortunate.” Cullen was aware that he walked a fine line between asserting his authority and goading the woman into the sort of rash action she was known for. “Her cooperation allows us to spare you the punishment for harbouring a dangerous mage...this once.”

Hawke’s eyes flickered to her ashen-faced mother - for Leandra’s sake, if not her own, she would back off. Still, he saw the machinations behind her eyes, risks being assessed, odds being calculated. She’d soon discover that even she couldn’t help her sister now, save through her continued friendship with the order. Bethany was escorted outside, but Cullen found his path obstructed.

“A word.” Hawke gave him her customary smile, a reminder that templar or no, she could stab him in five places before he even drew his sword. “If any harm comes to her, I’ll have your balls off.”

He wished he had the advantage of height to face down that cool glare. “If Mistress Bethany
follows the rules, no harm will come to her.”

“To put it politely, Cullen, that’s fucking horseshit.” Her eyes blazed. “Your Gallows are rotten to the core. And if any hint of that rottenness touches my sister, Maker help you.” There was fury behind her outburst, but also pain - another sibling lost, a family torn asunder. His brother’s coin weighed heavy in his pocket.

“Good day, Hawke.” In a low voice, he added, “I will protect her the best I can. You have my word.”

Hawke nodded, tense and unforgiving, before turning to her mother. He was glad Bethany missed the sight of Leandra falling to her knees, Hawke crouching to comfort her as she wept openly.

*For the safety of Kirkwall, he reminded himself. For the greater good.*

Chapter End Notes

So now I'm toying with the idea of a Hawke/Cullen hookup, which will obviously be poorly conceived and highly dysfunctional. Let me know what you think in the comments!
Haven, 9:41 Dragon Age

Cullen stalked towards Juliet, a sneer on his lips and a predatory glint in his eye.

“I hope they're right about you.” He stopped inches from her face, muscles coiled like a cat about to strike. Wait - why wasn't he wearing a shirt? “We've lost a lot of people getting you here.”

Where was here? It was snowy and she was surrounded by strangers staring at her with dull, accusing faces. They wanted her blood, she somehow knew, but she couldn't remember why. “Drop your weapon,” Cassandra snarled and she looked down at her manacled hands.

“I don't have a weapon!”


“I can't!”

She looked to the crowd for help, but they remained sullen and silent.

“You heard her, apprentice.” The templar wrapped his hand around her throat - Maker, he was so warm, and his voice was a sultry growl. “Drop your weapon.”

“I can't!”

“A shame.” His amber eyes raked slowly over her body before he stood back. “Cassandra.”

“No!” But it was too late - the sword hung in the air above her shackled wrists for a moment, then the gleaming steel fell…

“Shit.”

It was barely dawn outside the little hut they'd assigned to her. Already she could hear stirrings of activity - the rumble of carts wheels, the thunk of an axe on wood, and farther distant the ring of blunted practice weapons.

It was the last sound that made her face redden, recalling the - nightmare? Was that what it was? Because she was sure she shouldn't wake from a nightmare feeling oddly aroused. Then again, sex dreams shouldn't end in having your hands cut off by an irate Nevarran Seeker. If dream Cullen could just stick to being menacing…

Not that the real Cullen was particularly menacing. No, the only thing he had in common with the dream version was an uncanny knack for leaving her flustered and confused. She wouldn't let him see it, of course - reticence on his part was met with confidence on hers, coolness with flirtation until he was the one who blushed and stammered.

Groaning, she left the warm cocoon of her blankets to face another chill Haven morning. There were more pressing issues to face than her strained relationship with the Inquisition’s Commander.
The mage-templar conflict still raging in the Hinterlands, for one. The neverending requisitions and requests for the Inquisition's help and protection that somehow always spiralled into a thousand more things needing her attention.

Oh yes, and the fact that the Veil was torn in a thousand places and only she seemed capable of patching them up.

So never mind that Cullen was skittish around her. Never mind that she couldn't tell half the time if he saw her as a colleague or a friend or a dangerous liability - let dreams be dreams, and save her waking hours for worrying about the things that mattered.

She put on socks so thick that she struggled to get her boots on, for a moment wishing that she had a garment half as warm as Cullen's cloak seemed. But that led her down the path of thinking about the body beneath that cloak, and that train of thought was not at all productive.

In the grey light outside she spied Varric by the fire, a bowl of porridge warming his fingers.

"Freckles!" he greeted her. "You look like shit."

"And there's the talent with words that makes the ladies swoon," she quipped in return. "Any more where that came from?"

"You want more, you'll have to buy the books."

She raised an eyebrow. "I meant the porridge."

"Oh! Lady Herald!" A passing kitchen boy wheeled and almost dropped the stack of empty bowls he was carrying. "I'll get you some at once. Sorry for the delay, milady!"

"It's really not -" she started to say, but he had already dashed off towards the tavern.

Varric watched with evident amusement. "Should be used to that by now, shouldn't you?"

Juliet glowered at the dwarf. "Believe it or not I didn't have servants fawning over me in the Circle." She watched after the retreating boy. "It was almost easier when they wanted to kill me."

"As a friend of the Champion's after Kirkwall I can tell you that gets old pretty quickly."

Juliet took the time to see him properly - the weariness around his perpetually laughing eyes, the hunch of his shoulders when he thought back to those early days after the Kirkwall rebellion. "People were very angry, then?"

"That's an understatement," he laughed. "The Chantry had been blown to rubble…rubble that rained down on the city and destroyed people's homes. It took some convincing for people to believe that Blondie was acting on his own, especially with he and Hawke…"

"Wait, Anders and Hawke?" Varric flinched and Juliet lowered her voice. "Sorry, that just wasn't in the book."

"For obvious reasons. But good to know you've read my work!"

"Only Tale of the Champion, I'm afraid…but my sister loved Swords and Shields."

"Maker's breath," he cursed, shaking his head, "people actually read that trash?"

"That bad?" Her attention drifted - Cullen was heading up from the practice yard, scowling at a
sheaf of reports. Just through the gate he met her eyes and hesitated, with the look that was becoming so familiar to her. Unguarded at first, it was almost like the sight of her caused him pain. Then he became distant, stern but wary.

“Careful with that one, Freckles,” said Varric in a low voice.

“Careful?” With an effort she broke from Cullen's stare. “Careful how?”

“He's not a bad guy.” The dwarf frowned, picking his words carefully. “But he's got history with mages. Bad history. And fear makes people...unpredictable.”

“Really? In my experience it makes them very predictable.” They both fell silent as Cullen approached.

“Good morning, Herald. Varric. A fine day, is it not?”

Juliet shivered. “It's certainly...less cold than it could be. Are you heading to the Chantry?”

“I am. Would you care to walk with -”

“Herald! Milady.” The kitchen boy skidded to a halt, quailing under the Commander’s glare. “Begging your pardon, milady, your breakfast.” He held out a steaming bowl of porridge and she took it gratefully, the warmth seeping through her gloves and bringing the blood back into cold fingers.

“That's wonderful, thank you...” She paused, waiting for his name, but the terrified boy offered just a bow before running off again.

“Most of the kitchen staff are hired from among the refugees,” Cullen offered by way of an apology. “He was probably herding druffalo until a few months ago.”

“He's doing a fine job.” Juliet sniffed at the porridge, catching the hint of spices and dried apple.

Varric eyed the bowl enviously. “Is that honey?” he demanded. “And cream! Who do I have to bribe to get cream?”

“I didn't bribe anyone,” she protested through a mouthful of food.

“Of course you didn't - you're the Herald.”

She shrugged. “Swap?”

Cullen began to edge away. “I should leave you to your breakfast...”

“No, ‘sfine. I can walk and eat at the same time.”

“And talk, evidently.” He turned away quickly, leaving her unsure if she'd just witnessed the Commander making a joke. “We've had reports of Grey Warden activity on the Storm Coast. What's more concerning is that the follow-up we requested never came - we seem to have lost contact with our scouts in the area.”

Juliet nodded in passing to the dour quartermaster. “So we send soldiers?”

“Well...” Abashed, Cullen paused outside the Chantry door. “The thing is, they reported a lot of rift activity along the beach. As it stands it will be difficult for our forces to navigate -”
“You need me to go,” she said matter-of-factly, scraping the last of the porridge up with her tin spoon.

He frowned. “If there were another way…”

“It's fine, Cullen. This way the watchtowers will be built by the time we get back to the Hinterlands and we can move on with Dennet. Everything should be easier with some decent mounts.”

“Do you ride, Lady Trevelyan?”

She glanced up at him, caught off guard by what appeared to be a casual question. “Me? Not in a long time. Not on my own, anyway. I suppose I'll have to learn.”

“I'm sure you'll do well,” he said before blushing. “I mean, you seem an…adaptable…sort of person.”

“Thank you, I think.” She caught his longing glance towards the door. “You go ahead, I'll see what this messenger wants.”

Relieved, Cullen bowed and made a hasty retreat.

Well, he called me a person, she thought as she made her way to the young man by the Chantry door. There's progress.
“Glorious, isn't it?” Solona looked up at the sound of Leliana’s lilting voice. “I do love the splendours of Val Royeaux but there's something so peaceful about the forest.”

“I don't know about peaceful,” she replied. “Perhaps with less bears.” Letting her chin rest on her knees, she returned to watching the pool’s surface, the trickling flow of water making fallen leaves dance in slow circles as the last rays of sunlight glittered around them. Lush ferns grew around the tangled roots of trees that seemed to stretch up into the very sky. “Back in the Tower I could never have imagined all of this. Everything just…growing, wherever it wants to.”

Unexpected tears stung her eyes and she ducked her head to wipe them on her sleeve. She heard Leliana settle onto the ground beside her. A moment later an arm rested over her shoulders, soft lips pressing against her temple.

“So much was stolen from you,” the bard murmured. “All those years.”

“No.” Her fingers clenched in the mossy ground. “There's no point thinking of it like that. I wasn't tortured.” She felt Leliana flinch. “Or sold. Anybody here could tell a story sadder than mine. And we're alive where others aren't. Duncan, Cailan…”

“Cailan.” Leliana felt for her hand and squeezed it. “Wynne told me. Was it very terrible?”

“Yes,” she said shortly.

“I am sorry.”

“How will he be remembered, when men like Loghain write the histories? Who decides what stays, and what…” She trailed off.

“Through the stories of those who knew the truth. Like you.”

“And when we're gone?”

“That's the power of stories, Solona.” The bard smiled. “They live on.”

“I hope that's true. All this - there has to be something to show for it, even if we fail.” She looked down at her boots. “You won't let them forget, will you Leliana? That the Wardens weren't traitors, and a mage fought for them?”

“Together we will help them remember. Perhaps that is part of the reason why the Maker led me to you.”

“I'm glad he did.” Solona stood, brushing leaf litter from her hands. “We should get back to the others before it gets dark.”

Back at camp Wynne was attempting to show Alistair how to darn a sock, his face set in a frown of intense concentration as he gripped the needle in his warrior's hand. Solona paused at the top of the rise and watched him pull the thread through the tatty fabric.
Could it be possible that he wanted her, this beautiful specimen of a man? A grey-eyed, brown-haired, bookish Tower mage with even less family than himself. And yet when he glanced up his face softened at the sight of her, a broad grin lighting up his already handsome features. She felt her entire body sing in response.

“There you are!” Even his voice, the unabashed joy at seeing her again sparked a surge of happiness that was painful in its intensity, happiness that felt more like sadness. “Did you catch anything?”

“Leliana did. I found some roots and greens that might or might not kill us.” She held them out for Wynne’s inspection.

“Well, these are…” The older mage recoiled slightly. “That’s a nice fat rabbit, at least.”

“I should have been an assassin,” Solona joked. “I could find poisons in a kitchen garden.”

The unlucky rabbit and a few wafers of elven bread made enough of a meal for the four of them. It was a mild night and they huddled around the small fire more for comfort than warmth, Dog sometimes pricking his ears up at a distant sound before resting his massive head back on his paws. Alistair’s leg pressed against Solona’s, prompting a raised eyebrow from Wynne.

“Well I don’t know about you,” she said finally, “but I’m exhausted. Time for bed?” She looked pointedly at Solona and Alistair until the latter gave a nervous laugh.

“It is quite late, isn’t it?” He gave Solona a shy peck on the cheek before rising. “I’ll just be over here. Sleeping. By myself.”

They had left the tents with their companions in favour of travelling light. Solona could see just the barest hint of stars through the thick forest canopy as she lay in her bedroll, listening to the sounds of those around her gradually settling into sleep. Alistair shuffling to find a comfortable position, Dog rising and circling innumerable times before lying back down, finally Wynne’s delicate snore.

“Are you awake?” Alistair whispered, and she heard a sleepy grumble from Leliana.

“Me?”

“No...never mind.”

More time passed during which the only sound was the distant trickle of water. Then she heard a stirring, and Alistair pressed up against her back, warm and solid. “I think they’re finally asleep.”

“Not if you don’t keep your voice down.” She shuffled back into his embrace.

“Voice down. Got it.” He pushed her braid aside to kiss the back of her neck and she made a soft sound of contentment. “That goes for you too.”

“Shh,” she replied.

There was a rustle from the direction of Wynne’s bedroll and a pointed throat-clearing, and they both fell silent. Alistair stroked her hair for a time before his hand slipped beneath the blankets and under her shirt, resting hot against her ribcage. She covered his fingers with hers.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered.

“When? I’ve been right here.”
“All the time. Maker, how is it so hard to get you alone?”

Solona shifted her hips against him, hearing him hiss when she brushed the tight bulge in his trousers. “You want to get me alone?” she whispered.

“You know I do.” He moved restlessly against her, his hand sliding around her front - foiled by her waistband his fingers pressed down against the seam between her legs, making her gasp softly. “I want to touch you all the time. Everywhere.” There was no mistaking his erection now, grinding against her through layers of fabric - she reached behind her to feel the shape of him with her hand and he groaned, rutting faster and harder against her. “Maker, I can’t be quiet. I can’t.”

She twisted and stopped his mouth with hers, their mouths clashing in an artless kiss. “Come with me.”

“No,” she laughed softly, reluctantly prising his hand from between her thighs. “Come with me.” Gathering her blanket, she stood up carefully and drew him with her. “We’re going to be alone.”

Alistair followed her unquestioningly from the clearing, only stopping when they broke through the ring of trees to pull her in for a hungry kiss. “Is it safe?” he finally asked. “Even the trees could attack us around here.”

“Dog will keep watch,” she said and the Mabari whined in soft assent, flopping down on the path they had followed. A few paces on she spread the blanket over a hollow beneath a tree. “Will this do?”

“Solona.” Alistair buried his face in the soft skin of her neck. “I don't want to make do. I wanted to wait for the perfect time, but…”

“There is no perfect time,” she finished for him. “But it doesn't have to be perfect - it can still be good.”

“You know I've never done this before…”

“Follow my lead.”

Solona found herself nervous as a virgin again as they fumbled with each other's buttons and fastenings. She ran trembling hands over the planes of his chest, brushed her thumbs over flat dark nipples that were surprisingly sensitive.

“Oh,” he sighed. “Does it feel like that for you?”

“Would you like to find out?” Smiling, she untied her breast band until only her hands held it in place. Alistair’s eyes were wide and dark, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

“Can I?” he breathed, and she nodded. Gently he drew her hands away and with them the swath of fabric, baring her breasts to the moonlight. “Oh,” he said again. Tentatively his hands cupped the firm peaks. He mimicked her earlier action, rubbing the pads of his thumbs over her taut nipples and revelling in her low whimper of need. Bending to her breast he sucked the tip into his mouth and she had to grasp his shoulders to keep upright, her legs suddenly turning to water.

With a hand at the small of her back he eased her down onto the blanket, still languishing attention on her breasts as he fumbled to get her leggings down over her hips. “Let me,” she whispered. She eased out of leggings and smalls, not letting Alistair pause to admire her before she gave him the
same treatment. Naked, they kissed frantically, messily, both gasping when his shaft bumped against her slick folds.

“Fuck,” he moaned, his hips pinning her down as they thrust blindly against her. “I can't... I need…”

“Alistair,” she wheezed, “you're squashing me.”

“Maker's breath!” He rocked back on his heels, his cock standing dark and proud between his thighs. “I'm sorry, I'm an oaf. Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” she assured him. “Just...let me help you.” Leaning up she wrapped her fingers around his length - it was so hot and thick, pulsing gently under her touch. “Here - put your weight on your elbows.” She lay down, guiding him between her legs, feeling the broad tip nudge at her entrance and wondering briefly if he'd fit. Under her guidance he sank in and she shivered, welcoming the slow stretch of her walls around him. With every inch his eyes flickered to her face, searching for a sign of pain or discomfort but all she felt was completion, her hand finally shifting to the small of his back as he came to rest fully inside her.

“Is that alright?” Sweat was beading on his forehead, the tension apparent in his straining arms.

“Better than alright.” She felt wonderfully, perfectly filled, the throb of desire growing stronger beneath her belly. Her hands guided his hips, the first jerky movements gradually settling into an easy rhythm. The wonder in his face remained as he felt the grip of her muscles around him and heard the tiny sighs and whimpers his movements provoked. The discipline of his training showed in his even, measured strokes, the urge to go faster firmly ignored as he focused on prolonging her pleasure.

Growing in confidence Alistair shifted his weight onto a single elbow, surging forward with each thrust in a way that ground his pelvis against hers until she was gasping, pressing needily back against him. Maker, everything about him was so large, his broad shoulders blocking the stars and his hips spreading her wide, his fingers easily spanning her breast as he pinched and rolled her nipple. The thick length of him sliding in and out of her gripping heat, twitching inside her as he finally spent himself with a hoarse gasp.

She expected him to roll off her then, but he was determined. “Come with me,” he mumbled. Broad hands lifted her hips and even as he softened inside her he rocked her against him, chasing the moment when she keened and shook, her fingers digging into the hard muscle of his shoulders. Only when she was limp and sated did he slip free, a warm trail of liquid following in his wake.

“I've made a mess there, haven't I?” he said apologetically.

“It's normal.” She trailed a hand through his damp hair. “Was that what you hoped for?”

“No.” Tilting her chin up with a gentle finger, he kissed her tender lips. “It was more.”

Morning found them in their respective bedrolls, bodies and blankets rinsed clean in the stream. Still, more than once over breakfast Solona found Wynne watching them with sharp eyes, cataloguing each brush of fingers, each blush and smile and sideways glance.
“May I have a word?” she asked at last.

“Yes?” Solona followed her warily to a short distance from camp, bracing herself for a lecture.

Wynne nodded in Alistair’s direction. “You're quite taken with each other, aren't you?” She was not put off by Solona’s blank look. “It's hard not to notice the doe-eyed looks he gives you. Especially when he thinks no one's watching.”

Despite herself, she felt a warm glow at Wynne’s words. “Why do you ask?” she said carefully.

“I've noticed your blossoming relationship, and I wanted to ask you where you thought it was going.”

She shrugged. “Does it have to go anywhere?”

Wynne’s mouth tightened into a disapproving line. “Alistair is a fine lad, skilled in battle, but quite inexperienced when it comes to affairs of the heart. I would hate to see him get hurt.”

“And you think I’m going to hurt him?”

“Not intentionally, no. But there is great potential for tragedy here, for one or both of you. You are both Grey Wardens, and he is the son of a king.” She crossed her arms, the senior enchanter delivering a speech on the dangers of temptation. “You have responsibilities which supersede your personal desires.”

Solona could no longer bite back her irritation. “Do you really think I forget my responsibilities? You think there’s any waking moment I could do that, even if I wanted to?”

The mage shook her head. “Love is ultimately selfish. It demands that one be devoted to a single person, who may fully occupy one’s mind and heart, to the exclusion of all else.” She put up a hand to ward off Solona’s angry interruption. “A Grey Warden cannot afford to be selfish. You may be forced to make a choice between saving your love, and saving everyone else, and then what would you do?”

“I’m not a child,” she snapped, aware that in this moment she sounded like one. “I’m not about to throw everything away because my head is turned.”

“Nothing is certain,” Wynne argued. “Not in these times. You cannot take anything for granted. I want you to be aware of this.”

“I’m aware of little else.” And that’s what made her defensive, she realised - her own doubts and fears, parroted back to her in the guise of wisdom. Abruptly, the fight went out of her. “So, what...you’re telling me to end it?”

“You may have to, to save one or both of you unnecessary anguish later on.”

She’d done her best to keep him at arm’s length. To keep everyone at arm’s length, and it had been difficult, and tiring, and lonely. So, so lonely. “You were raised in the Circle,” she appealed. “Didn’t you ever want just one thing for yourself? Even if you knew it couldn’t last?”

“I did,” the older woman said sadly. “And it might have been easier for everyone had I not taken it.” She turned away, her years seeming suddenly to sit heavier than before. “I have given my advice. Do with it what you will.”

Solona looked back towards camp, catching Alistair watching her with a smile that squeezed her
heart. It was too late, she realised, to avoid anguish. Perhaps it had always been too late.
Chapter Summary

Cullen/Hawke smut in all its dubious glory

Kirkwall, 9:34 Dragon Age

“Knight-Commander.”

Meredith looked up from her desk with a faint frown of irritation. “Cullen?”

“The mage that was made Tranquil this morning - I was present at her Harrowing.” It was perhaps a year ago but he remembered the girl, a young apprentice who had been at the Circle since adolescence.

The Knight-Commander’s lips thinned and she turned back to her paperwork. “And?”

“And?” Cullen hesitated, perplexed. “Well - she passed.” That much should have been obvious to his superior but he unwisely pressed on. “Mages cannot be forcibly made Tranquil after their Harrowing.”

“Thank you, Cullen, for educating me on Chantry Law.” Meredith smiled without a trace of humour. “The girl was a blood mage and a danger to all around her.”

“A blood mage?” Since his arrival in Kirkwall scarcely a week went by without some report of blood magic crossing his desk - thankfully most proved to be the product of an overly-imaginative witness or the result of a grudge, but all were investigated as thoroughly as possible. This was the first he’d heard of such practices within the Circle. “But there was no trial - the First Enchanter -”

“Orsino’s judgement cannot be trusted in such things.” Meredith dismissed the First Enchanter with a flick of her wrist. “We cannot allow blood mages to dwell amongst us while we wait for an impartial judgement from the Chantry in Val Royeaux. We face a war here, Cullen - I thought you understood that. Was I mistaken?”

“Of course not. But there are rules in place for a reason -”

“The mage’s transgressions were witnessed by two templars,” she snapped. “Is the word of your brother templars not evidence enough for you?”

“If I could perhaps be permitted to speak with the witnesses next time before such a step is taken -”

“They spoke to me.” Exasperated, Meredith pushed away the report she had been writing. “You have enough duties, Cullen. You need not take on the responsibilities of others as well.” Her glare softened. “The Divine is aware that we face a unique set of challenges here in Kirkwall. She has given us a certain amount of discretion to act as we think best in cases such as this.”

“The Divine?” he said with surprise. “I had not heard -”
“And now you have,” Meredith replied in a tone that brooked no further argument. “May I carry on with my work, Cullen, or would you prefer to write these reports yourself considering that you know my job better than I do?”

“Of course, Knight-Commander. I apologise.”

Maker, Cullen, whose side are you on? he thought to himself as he strode away.

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“Cullen…”

He woke with a start. The stone floor was hard and cold beneath his cheek.

“Over here, Cullen.” There was a tinkle of female laughter. “We've been waiting for you, sleepyhead.”

Cullen sat up, groaning. “Solona? Is that you?” The familiar shelves of Kinloch Hold library swam into view and he felt a moment’s wild panic. But wait...there was no pulsing cage, no blood on the floor, no corruption climbing the walls. Looking down he found himself clad in the linen shirt and sleeping pants he'd worn to bed.

“Not just me.” Blearily he turned towards the voice. His first impression was of skin, pale and olive limbs entwined atop the low reading bench. Grey eyes and brown regarded him curiously.

“You know my cousin, Cullen.” Solona’s fingers trailed down the other woman’s side. “Say hello, Bethany.”

Bethany Hawke smiled languidly as Solona kissed her neck. “Hello, Cullen.”

“What is this?” Bethany shouldn't be here - none of them should be here. “It's a dream. You're not real.”

Solona sighed, disappointed in him. “But it's such a nice dream. Won't you join us?” Her hand slipped between Bethany’s legs. “Tell him what a nice time we're having, Bethany.”

“Mmmm.” The girl's eyes fluttered closed, opening only to regard Cullen through lowered lashes. “It would be so much nicer if he'd join us.”

“You hear that, Cullen? She wants you. Haven't you thought about how these pretty tits would feel in your hands? We know you have.” She cupped one full breast in her hand, trapping the pink nipple between her fingers. “They're so soft, Cullen. And she tastes so sweet. Sweet little Bethany.” Her eyes became sharp. “Wait - I know what you need.”

He looked back to Bethany, her face suddenly vacant. She sat up slowly and his eyes were drawn to the sunburst brand on her forehead.

“No. I don't…”

“I'm yours, Knight Captain,” she said dully. “Command me.”

“I wouldn't,” he protested but now he was watching himself, standing naked before the tranquil mage, a hand in her hair and his face impassive as he pushed her down towards his crotch.
“Why not?” Solona whispered in his ear. “Everybody else is doing it.”

“No.” But he couldn't look away as her lips stretched around his cock.

“It's not like they're people. Isn't that what you said, Cullen? This is what you want. A world where
they can't rebel. Can't think. Can't say no.”

Bethany gagged - he was fucking her mouth now, hands fisted in her hair as he drove against the
back of her throat.

“Stop this,” he cried. “This is monstrous.”

“Monstrous, Cullen?” Solona’s arms wrapped around him, her breasts pressed against his back as
her hand snaked down his belly. “Then why are you so hard?”

“No!”

He awoke with his hand on his cock, recoiling from himself when he realised. There was a
pounding on the door.

“Knight-Captain!”

“I'm fine!” he barked. It wasn't true - he was uncomfortably hard, revulsion and arousal crowding
his brain until he could barely think straight. Usually the lyrium suppressed the urges of his body
and the fact that it was his repulsive nightmare that had stirred him so was a source of deep shame.

“Knight-Captain, you're needed.”

Of all the blighted… “Wait.” He rolled from bed. A cloak hung on a peg by the door - it would
make for a spectacle over his sleeping garb but at least it would offer him some decency. He flung
the door open. “What?”

The young templar did his best not to quail. “I am sorry to trouble you so late, Knight-Captain.”

“Keran.” Hawke be damned, he should have thrown the boy out when he had the chance. “What's
this about?”

“There's a disturbance in the courtyard, ser.”

“And this requires my attention why, exactly? You can't disperse a few troublemakers?”

Keran flushed with embarrassment. “Not a few, ser. One. She demanded to see you, and we could
have tried to see her off, but…”

Cullen’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Tried?”

“We weren't going to see her off without some force, ser, and - it's Hawke, ser.”

“Andraste’s blighted.” He raked a hand through his hair, curls sticking up stubbornly from sleep.
“Fine. I'll speak with the blasted woman.” He stomped past the hapless templar before turning.
“Not the inner courtyard, I hope?”
“You’d hear her by now if she’d gotten that far, ser. She's…well, you'll see soon enough.”

By the time he had reached the courtyard within the Gallows proper he had worked himself into a fury. The sound of shouting reached his ears from the market area below.

“Cullen! Knight-Captain Cullen! Come out and face me, you fucking -” There was a crash, followed by muffled cursing. “Cullen! I'm not leaving. I can wait all night, I don't care. Cullen!” Fists battered on the heavy portcullis.

“Hawke,” he snapped as he approached. “What in the Void do you think you're doing?”

“You!” She staggered. “Let me in.”

“I certainly will not. You're drunk.”

“You have my sister. My sis-” Hawke crouched, only her fingers on the bars holding her upright. “I need her,” she said brokenly. “Need Bethany.”

Maker, she was a mess. “Go home, Hawke. Come back in the daytime when you're sober.”

“No.” She clawed her way upright, jaw set stubbornly. “I wrote. I came - nobody would see me. I'm going…nowhere.” Her blue eyes were rimmed with red. “Her funeral, they wouldn't let...I'm staying here.”

Cullen had denied Bethany’s request in person. It would have been a simple thing, just to let her travel to the Chantry for a few hours, under escort. Terrible, what happened to her mother. But people died. They couldn't allow a mage out of the Circle every time there was a death in the family, some of them in far-flung places…making exceptions set a dangerous precedent.

She had thanked him for his time. Actually *thanked* him.

“Wait there,” he growled. “I'm coming out.”

The templars on duty unlocked the side door to let him through. “Will you need any assistance, Knight-Captain?” one woman asked.

“I think not.”

“But she's -”

“Grieving,” he snapped. “Leave us be.”

“Very well, ser,” she said doubtfully. “We'll be here if you need us.”

Hawke was a puddle of shadow by the portcullis and he thought for a moment she might have fallen asleep. His relief was short-lived - what was he supposed to do with an unconscious Hawke? Then she turned towards him, straightening with as much dignity as she could muster.

“Here I am.” He crossed his arms. “Now talk.”

“Talk?” She smiled unpleasantly. “Careful what you wish for, Cullen. Where's my fucking drink gone?” Scowling, she began to search the ground.

“Seriously, Hawke? Don't you think you've had enough?”

“I'm awake, aren't I? So I can't have had enough.” Her unsteady path led her back towards the
markets and he reluctantly followed, cursing the particular combination of luck and stupidity that had led him here. “There you are!” An earthenware bottle rested by a stack of crates and she picked it up with exaggerated care.

“What in the Void is that?” The fumes drifting from the bottle were enough to burn his nose. He reached for it and she snatched her hand away.

“Brandy. Get your own.”

“I'd rather not,” he said and Hawke made a noise of outrage.

“Too good for the Hanged Man’s brandy, Cullen?” She took a swig and winced before thrusting the bottle under his nose. “Go on.”

“Didn't you just say…? Fine.” It couldn't leave a worse taste in his mouth than the lingering dream, even if it burned like rage on the way down. “Blessed Maker, that's foul.”

“Bethany.” Hawke had regained focus. She sat heavily on top of a crate, her eyes piercing him. “You took my sister.”

“I had no choice.”

“You took her,” she insisted. “And I can't get her back.”

“No, you can't.” Cullen took another gulp of the disgusting brandy. “She's part of the Circle now.”

“Get fucked,” Hawke said dully.

“I am sorry about your mother.” Cullen sat beside her, passing the bottle back against his better judgement. “Truly.”

“She's dead. Did you hear how? He cut her up and stuck her head on a pile of dead women. I didn't stop it. Can't stop anything. Can't keep anyone safe.” She looked at him accusingly. “Bethany was supposed to be safe here. Mother begged me not to take her and I didn't. But she wasn't safe from you, was she?” A finger jabbed painfully in his chest. “Not from you.”

He would not feel ashamed. He would not. “The Circle is as much for the mages’ protection as -”

“However did we live, all those years without your protection?” she sneered. “What made my father run away, when all you were concerned with was his protection? Help me understand, Cullen. Because all I know is that you came into our home and stole my sister. Our mother died without ever seeing her again and now I'm alone.” Her eyes filled with tears and he remembered how young she was, beneath that spiky exterior. “Everybody’s gone and I'm alone.”

“I…” He reached for her shoulder, relieved when she didn't draw a weapon on him. “You're not alone, Hawke. You have your friends.”

She barked with laughter. “My friends. Ever tried to herd cats, Cullen?”

“I can't say that I have.” It might be a similar experience to speaking with a drunken Hawke.

“No? Well that's my friends. A giant herd of fucking cats.” She sniffed. “And just like cats, they only like you when you're not looking at them. He left, the bastard, he came round and said he couldn't stop thinking of me and he fucked me and then he said it was a mistake and he fucking left. And now he's angry again, like it's my fault. Stupid fucking elf.”
“I don't know who you're talking about, Hawke.”

“And fucking Anders, he says he'll drown everything in blood but do you think he'll just bend me over and fuck me? The Void he will. Men, they're all fucking cowards.”

“Hawke, I think...”

“That's your problem. Too much thinking.” Her hand was on his knee and Maker help him, he remembered the press of Solona’s breasts against his back, and worse, and he was once more as hard as steel. “I hate thinking.”

Cullen stood abruptly. “Hawke. Alyse.”

“Only my mother calls me that.” She rose to follow him, a dangerous sway to her hips. “Called.”

“You should go home.”

“You don't want that.”

“Yes, I do.” He didn't. He wanted to be touched, to touch. He could feel her hand on his knee like a brand and confusion made him say the first foolish thing that popped into his head. “This won't help to get your sister back.”

Drink did not slow her reflexes - the blow snapped his head around before he even saw her move. “Fuck you, Cullen.” Before he could respond her hands had fisted in his cloak, her mouth smashing against his. She bit his lip and he tasted blood.

She was strong - he wasn't sure if taking off the cloak was an attempt to dislodge her or some darker impulse at work, but it was undone and he was throwing it on the ground. “You're drunk.”

“And you're hard.” She slipped a nimble hand down the front of his pants, pumping his length with a twist to her wrist that made his knees weak. “What are we going to do about that?”

“Stop.” Cullen pulled her hand away. He seized both her wrists but couldn't keep her body from pressing against his, an unbearable friction against his straining erection. Her lips found his again and he was kissing her back like a man starved.

He pushed her, advancing into her space until the backs of her legs bumped into an empty crate. She helped him to get her leggings down around her thighs and then he knelt before her as if in prayer, his hands cupping her firm buttocks.

“Andraste preserve me.” But it wasn't Andraste, not Solona, not Bethany but Hawke, her cunt so close to his face he could smell her arousal. He ran the flat of his tongue up her slit, gathering the slick that was already seeping from her folds.

“Fuck, Cullen.” Her fingers carded through his hair, blunt nails scratching at his scalp. “You dirty boy.” She swayed on her feet as he pushed his tongue inside her, a hand shooting out behind her to steady herself. He was rusty at this but her shallow gasps were all the encouragement he needed. He spread her wide with his thumbs, tonguing her clit until she bucked and whined, the heady taste of her making his cock throb.

“Stop. Stopstopstopstop.” Hawke pushed him away, her breath heaving.

“What?” he demanded, irritated at the interruption.
“If I'm getting off,” she slurred, “you are too.” She turned and planted her hands flat atop the crate. Her perfectly rounded arse shone pale in the moonlight. “Come on then, Knight-Captain,” she demanded. “Show me how templars do it.”

Go back now, part of his mind screamed. You've already gone too far. But no, he was on his feet behind her, his fingers digging into her hips and his rigid cock sliding all too easily into her waiting heat.

“Fuck,” she cursed. He gave an experimental roll of his hips and she ground back against him. “For fuck's sake, Cullen, put your back into it.”

Painfully aroused and with nerves still frayed from his nightmare, Cullen was in no mood for teasing. He grabbed a handful of her short hair. “Is this what you want, Hawke?” he snarled. He snapped his hips sharp against her, forcing a cry from her throat.

“Harder,” she spat.

She wanted it hard? Fine. He dragged her leggings off, kicked her feet apart and slammed back into her, channelling his rage, his frustration, his confused lust into each violent stroke.

Hawke met him thrust for thrust, hot and tight around him and oh, Maker, so wet, the slap of his balls against her so loud as to be obscene. He felt them tightening, his end fast approaching.

When he reached around to finger her clit she convulsed beneath him with a choked scream, and the ripple of her cunt undid him - he pulled out just in time, jets of his seed splashing her thighs and the crate beneath them.

It was over as fast as it had begun. They came back to sanity gradually, breathing in ragged gasps of air.

“I'm sorry. Shit. I shouldn't have done that.” Cullen stumbled back as though he was the one intoxicated, pulling up his trousers. “Maker, Hawke, forgive me.”

“Don't be such a fucking prude, Cullen. You fuck too well to be shy about it.” She wriggled back into her smalls and leggings, heedless of the mess he'd left. “We had an itch, we scratched it. It's that simple.”

“But you're drunk - I took advantage.”

“And you're…” Hawke looked him up and down. “What are you? At least as fucked up as I am, anyway. Don't flatter yourself, you couldn't take advantage of me with both hands tied behind my back.” She smiled crookedly. “You're welcome to try sometime.”

“Regardless, I was wrong.” Shame roiled in his gut, burning more fiercely than the brandy. “It was unforgivable.”

She shrugged. “For this, I forgive you. Not for the rest. And Cullen, if you tell anyone…”

“You'll cut my balls off?”

“You know me so well. You can keep the brandy.”

“Can you get home?”

“I'll swim.” She shook her head at his horrified expression. “I know a pirate, Cullen. If she hasn't
gotten bored waiting around, she'll take me back across. Of course she's more shitfaced than I am so we might yet drown.” With a mocking salute she turned her back, walking with exaggerated steadiness towards the harbour.

“Hawke!”

She sighed, looking over her shoulder. “What the fuck do you want now, Cullen?”

He cleared his throat. “Is there anything…can I pass on a message?”

Hawke hesitated, considering. “Tell her I'm sorry. No…tell her…fuck it. Just tell her something.”

She walked away and the last thing he saw was her middle finger, before she vanished into the shadows.
There was something about the room that didn't feel right, but Juliet couldn't quite put her finger on what. Had something been moved? Added, or taken away? She cast a critical eye over the furnishings. Chairs covered in cushions and blankets faced the hearth, a sweet-smelling fire roaring there and casting a cozy glow over the scene. Plain but sturdy shelves packed with all manner of books, the table set with wine and fresh-baked bread, steaming soup ready to be ladled into two waiting bowls.

Outside an icy wind raged but the shutters were secure, not a hint of cold making it into their little haven.

_Haven._ The word tickled something in the back of her mind. “Cullen, where did…?”

“What's that, my love?” The bed in the corner creaked as he sat up and stretched, languid as a cat. “Are you coming to bed?”

_Tempting._ He gleamed gold in the firelight, all coiled strength and smooth skin begging to be touched and tasted. But the sight of dinner had reminded her of the gnawing hunger in the pit of her belly. “Don't you want to eat first?”

“Of course, you must be starved.” With effortless grace he rose from the bed and padded over to her. It was difficult to focus on his face. Maker, why was she so tired? There were his full lips in a crooked smile, bisected by that familiar pink scar. And his eyes, pools of dark gold made darker by desire.

_Desire._ She shook her head in an attempt to clear it.

“Are you alright, Jules?” Cullen's arms wrapped around her waist, his hands sliding underneath her shirt to rest tantalisingly on her bare skin.

“Maker, you're like a furnace!” She felt his chest, all but burning beneath her touch, and he laughed, bending down close to her ear.

“You're so cold,” he murmured, his voice like liquid silk. “Let me warm you.”

“No.” That wasn't his voice. This...none of this was real.

And just like that it was gone. She was half-buried in the snowdrift into which she'd fallen, weary and sore and chilled to the bone. But carried away on the wind she fancied she heard the disappointed shriek of Desire, and she smiled grimly as she struggled to her feet.

“Try harder, bitch,” she muttered.

Now, which fucking way was she going?
At first she thought it was another demon trick. The embers of a fire, not enough to warm her but enough to spark a wary hope. Then people, an all-too familiar voice shouting “It's her!”

“Bollocks, not this again,” she muttered as she found herself scooped up into strong arms.

“What's that, Herald?”

Herald. In no secret fantasy would Cullen call her Herald, and demons weren't subtle enough to conjure the shadows beneath his eyes. “Real,” she said, her voice cracked and hoarse. “It's real.”

“All too real, I'm afraid.” Cullen somehow struggled out of his furred mantle and draped it over her, all while keeping her safely tucked against his chest. “But Maker, I'm glad to see you.”

There was such tender relief in his tone that she wondered for a moment if she really was falling prey to a demon - the real Cullen would never speak to her like that, soft and husky. Then she slipped into oblivion.

“I'm glad to see you.” His breath was hot on her neck and his hands roamed over her naked skin. They pressed together on her single bed in Haven, lips and tongues tangling together in an increasingly frantic embrace while outside voices were raised in song. The Dawn Will Come.

“Why are they singing?” she gasped as his calloused fingers ran up the inside of her thigh.

“It doesn't matter.” His eyes met hers, fierce and hungry. “Juliet…”

His hand slipped between her legs and pleasure coursed, sharp and sudden as lightning, through her body.

“Cullen!”

“Herald?” The voice she heard was unmistakably his, lacking the breathy fervour of her dream. “Lady Trevelyan?”

Reluctantly she coaxed her heavy lids open. Gritty eyes focused on the Commander, his brows creased with concern.

“I'm sorry,” she croaked. “I had a nightmare.”

“I am hardly surprised.” Cullen rose stiffly. “Let me fetch the healer. You have exerted yourself too soon after your trials, we should have -”

“No,” she protested weakly. “I don't need more healing. Perhaps if we could spare a small tent, rather than keeping me in the infirmary. There must be people more in need of attention.”

Cullen paused, uncharacteristically indecisive. “Herald, your injuries -”

“Have healed.” She sat up, disguising her wince at the complaint of overtaxed muscles. “What I need is a decent night's rest. There's too much coming and going here, it's impossible to sleep properly. I'm sorry if I sound selfish…”

Instantly he was contrite. “Not at all, Herald. Next time we stop for the night I will see that you can
rest in privacy. I am sorry that this didn't occur to me earlier.”

“You've been wonderful,” she said, then amended with a blush, “you've all been wonderful.”

“Should I leave you in peace, then?” He turned to go.

“No!” Dawn light was beginning to break through the canvas - it would be time to get up soon enough. “I mean, I'm awake now. Don't leave on my account.”

“It's on your account I'm here,” he admitted, taking his seat again. “A scout said you were restless, and I thought perhaps a fever, or - ” He fell suddenly silent, all but squirming in discomfort.

“You can say it.”

“I apologise, Lady Trevelyan. You have been Harrowed, I should not suspect such a thing. Indeed, I didn't, but…”

“Better safe than sorry, right?” She stifled a cough, not wanting to give him further cause to fuss over her. Briefly she wondered what would make him more uncomfortable, to think that her restless sleep was the result of demon activity, or to know that she'd been dreaming of the two of them writhing in a naked embrace.

“Is something funny?” Cullen watched her with a disapproving frown.

“Oh no, not funny.” Juliet fought her smile back into submission.

He looked searchingly at her face. “There was a Trevelyan in the Kirkwall circle. A templar. I don't suppose…?”

“Michael? My brother.”

He huffed in amusement. “Well that explains the chip on his shoulder.”

“Why?” she asked. “Because he's a noble?”

“No, because you're - well - ” Realising his faux pas too late, Cullen stammered to a halt.

“A mage,” she said helpfully, as if perhaps he'd forgotten the word. “You didn't know that?”

“There were many men and women under my command in Kirkwall,” he replied a touch defensively. “I didn't see the need to dig too far into their backgrounds unless they gave me cause.”

“Michael didn't give you cause, then.” Of course he didn't. Even as a child, Michael never strayed far from the rules.

“He was - is - a loyal templar. There was never any indication he sympathised with the mages,” he said stiffly, ignoring her derisive snort, “but nor was he involved in any abuse of power under my watch.”

“From what I've heard that would place him in the minority.”

She regretted her thoughtless words when his expression became shuttered. “Kirkwall was not an easy place. I wouldn't expect you to understand.”

Outside the camp was beginning to stir to life, the Inquisition’s diminished forces readying for another day's march in the snow. Sighing, Juliet swung her legs from the cot.
“Solas says the fortress shouldn't be far now,” she said in an effort to change the subject.

“Do you trust the word of that apostate?” Cullen jumped up to help her down, but she waved him off.

“I'm an apostate,” she reminded him gently.

“Well, yes.” Once more on the back foot, he raised a flustered hand to his neck. “But not by choice.”

Juliet shrugged on her coat, glancing up at him before she began to lace her tall boots. “Choice was one luxury I was not afforded,” she said with a smile to soften the barb. “It's a story you're familiar with, I'm sure.”

Cullen's eyes darkened with something like shame. “Indeed,” he said shortly. “I won't disturb you any longer, Herald. Give the word when you are ready to march.”

*Forget that one, Trevelyan,* she thought as she watched him depart. *Too much history.*

At the same time she remembered strong arms lifting her, a husky *Maker, I'm glad to see you.*
Solona (we'll see the sun again)

The Deep Roads, 9:30 Dragon Age

“Are you awake?”

Solona’s eyes flickered open, finding only the persistent inky darkness of the Deep Roads. “I am now,” she complained. “Is it time to get up?”

“I have no idea,” Alistair confessed. “I’m sorry, you were thrashing around so much I thought you might have woken up already.”

She rolled to face him, the better to keep their whispered conversation private. “I must have been dreaming. Sorry if I woke you.”

“You didn’t,” he reassured her. “But it’s difficult to go back to sleep with a beautiful girl wriggling against you.”

She stifled a giggle, biting her lip. “It’s been too long, hasn’t it? I don’t know what I miss more, daylight or sex.”

Alistair groaned softly. “I do.” He gasped as her hand snaked beneath his blankets, tracing his already stiff length through the fabric of his leggings. “Oh, Andraste’s…you don't have to do that.”


“Seriously,” he gasped. “I don't know when we'll get a chance to bathe again, and I don't want to make a mess…”

“I've thought of that.” She shuffled down the bedroll, determinedly working at his laces.

“What are you…? Oh, Maker.”

“Shhh.” She licked again at his swollen head. “I need you to be quiet.” Still, he couldn't stifle his soft groan as she took his girth between her lips.

It was a madness that drove her, the crushing oppression of all that stone above and around them, the uncertainty of whether they would ever see the sky again. Each day their doom seemed more certain and she wouldn't let him die without feeling the proof of her love, her desperate need for him.

He reached down and ran his fingers through her hair, and she wasn’t even self-conscious about its greasy, unwashed state. Down here everything was primal, feral, the gore and grime as much a part of them by now as their skin. Instead she revelled in the scratch of his blunt nails against her scalp as she took him deeper, wiry hairs tickling her nose and her senses filled with the dark, animal musk of him. The squeeze of her thighs couldn't relieve the tension at her core and she slid a hand between her legs, pressing hard against the ache until she shuddered, swallowing down every trace of his salt-bitter spend.

Alistair tugged her up to his shoulder, hiding his uneven breath in her hair. “What did I do to deserve that?” he whispered raggedly.

“Just for being you.” She kissed the corner of his mouth. “And for not thinking I'm possessed any
time I have a bad dream.”

“If any of us here are in thrall to a desire demon, it's me,” he joked weakly.

“I think despair would have an easier time with me down here.” Solona burrowed into his warmth and his arm around her tightened.

“That bad, huh?”

She shivered. “I can't stand it. The dark, and the stale air, and the stink. I can't breathe in here. Is this what being a Warden is like?”

“Not all the time, no. And not normally this bad. But yes, this is more or less what we do.”

“I don't want to die down here,” she whispered.

“Hey!” He tilted her face towards his, although they couldn't see each other in the black darkness. “Nobody is dying down here.”

“Perhaps not this time. But one day... it's how we go, isn't it? Wardens?”

“Enough of that,” he chided. “Despair, I forbid you from possessing this woman.”

“Thank goodness there's a templar down here to slay me if I go mad.”

“I'm not a templar!” he protested. “And I wouldn't do that.”

“You wouldn't put me down?” she demanded, incredulous. “If I was an abomination?”

“Why are we even talking about this? You're not an abomination and you won't become one.”

“But if...”

“No.” Alistair was firm. “I'm not discussing this. It's not going to happen, and if it did I'd find another way.”

“There is no other way.”

“Connor -”

“Is not the best example. How many died in Redcliffe?”

“This is stupid.” He turned his back to her. “There's no point talking about it.”

*You may be forced to make a choice between saving your love, and saving everyone else, and then what would you do?*

“I'm sorry,” Solona whispered to his back. “I would never make you choose such a thing.” She wrapped an arm around his broad chest. “There's no demon here, just ordinary old despair. It will pass.”

She felt him hesitate before he linked his fingers with hers, pressing a kiss to the back of her hand. “It will. We'll do what we came to do, and we'll see the sun again. I promise.”
Frostback Mountains, 9:30 Dragon Age

It took weeks to deliver on that promise, weeks of darkness, filth and horror until one evening they stumbled out of Ostagar, even the dying twilight hurting their eyes.

“I can’t talk about it just yet.” Solona mumbled in response to their companions’ questions. “Perhaps in the morning. In the daylight.”

“We should have stayed in Ostagar long enough to have a bath somewhere,” Alistair mused after dinner, sniffing at his clothes in disgust.

“There’s a stream,” she pointed out.

“It’ll be cold.” It was an understatement - snow lay in patches on the ground and the night air was frigid.

Solona took a deep breath, letting the icy cold fill her lungs. “I’d rather freeze to death than stay down there a moment longer.”

He drew her into the circle of his arms. “It was hard on you, wasn’t it?”

She shivered. “The things we saw…”

“Not just that. The Deep Roads. The dark.” Kissing the top of her head, he tightened his embrace. “But look, the world's still up here. The sky. And tomorrow we'll see the sun.”

“Sun,” she sighed wistfully. “I was starting to think it was something I'd made up.”

“Come.” Alistair’s hand on the small of her back steered her towards the creek. “Let's at least meet the sun with some of this darkspawn filth cleaned away.”

Solona cast a fire rune on the ground and summoned wisp lights to compensate for the weak moonlight, and they sat cross-legged by the stream dipping rags in the icy water and carefully wiping the grime from every inch of exposed skin.

“The first inn we come to,” she said as she worked a bar of hard yellow soap through Alistair’s short hair, “we're taking a bath.”

“Just one bath for the two of us?” he asked hopefully. “I won't object.” He took advantage of her raised arms to run his hands down her waist. “Are you very tired? It's just that we'll have a tent tonight. All to ourselves. I thought perhaps…” He smiled bashfully. “I could do all the work, if you'd like.”

She kissed him, soapy hands sliding around the back of his neck. “Being with you isn't work.”

“I'm just saying,” he said huskily, “I've missed your body. I want to see you, and touch you. I want it more than the sun.”

Between her thighs, Solona felt the faint throb of desire begin to build. Her body shifted to fit against him, making a low noise of satisfaction when his lips slid over her neck. “I think I'd like that too.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”
The morning sun broke through the clouds, pale and weak but warm on her skin, the most perfect thing she'd ever felt. Well, nearly the most perfect.

Around her Dog bounded in circles, throwing himself onto the ground with puppyish abandon. He leaped up as Wynne passed, leaning hard enough against her legs to nearly throw her off balance. With a long-suffering sigh, the mage bent down to scratch his back.

“You look better already,” she remarked. “The sunshine agrees with you.”

“Then I've joined the wrong profession,” Solona half-joked.

Wynne’s glance fell on the tent where Alistair still slumbered. The younger mage sighed, bracing herself for a lecture, but Wynne shook her head gently.

“I have watched you for a time and perhaps I was wrong,” she said. “There seems to be something special between the two of you. He seems less guarded when in your company. Allows himself to relax. And he seems genuinely happy.”

“He is.” Solona blushed. “We both are.”

“I think I was too harsh in my judgement before, and I am sorry.” Wynne pursed her lips thoughtfully. “What you have may not last forever; death or duty may part you. But love’s worthiness is not diminished because of that. I should have seen this before. Instead you learn to cherish every precious moment that you spend together, knowing that it may be the last.” She smiled fondly. “And for those of us watching - well, it brings warmth to these old bones, to know that something so beautiful can be found in the midst of chaos and strife.”

“Strife?” Alistair’s tousled head emerged from the tent. “It's too early in the morning for strife, surely. Do I need my sword?”

Wynne looked indulgently at the young warden. “I was just remarking to your young friend here, that now you have all the armies listed in your treaties.”

“Oh yes,” he grumbled as he got to his feet. “Now we just need to defeat Loghain and unite the kingdom. Simple.”

“Have you given any thought to what happens next?”

“Next? I was hoping we might kill the archdemon and, you know, save the world.” Alistair scratched his ribs, yawning. “But honestly, right now I can't think far beyond breakfast. Anything that’s not dried nug would be welcome. Ideally not nug at all. I don't suppose there's cheese?”

“If there is, it's probably nug cheese.” Solona laughed at his grimace, taking his rough, warm hand in hers. “Come on, let's see what's cooking.”
Cullen (the wicked edge gleaming)

Kirkwall, 9:38 Dragon Age

_Oh, Maferath’s…_ Cullen felt the morning’s headache return as he saw who awaited him in his office.

“What can I do for you, Hawke?”

She smirked, leaning back in his chair with her booted ankles crossed neatly on top of his desk. “Quite a bit, if I remember correctly.”

“That seems unlikely, considering the state you were in.”

Hawke rolled her eyes. “If that’s an attempt to shame me, Cullen, I think it reflects rather worse on you. Taking advantage of a vulnerable, defenceless - “

“Defenceless? Ha!” Variations of this conversation had been played out enough over the intervening years that Hawke no longer had the power to make him feel shame over their sordid encounter - which, knowing Hawke, was probably her plan all along. He took the chair across from her, relieved enough at the opportunity to sit that he ignored the fact she had turned him into a petitioner in his own office. “I assume there is a point to this visit?”

“Oh, there’s always a point.” She had the grace to take her feet down, instead planting her elbows on the desk and resting her chin in her hands. “You look bloody awful, has anyone told you that?”

“Not with your tact and charm, they haven’t.” He wasn’t about to tell her that he’d been on reduced lyrium rations for several weeks. Let the woman mind her own bloody business for once. “Are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?”

“Why guess when you could pry it out of me, hmm?” Her green eyes flashed wickedly. “Perhaps I’m looking for a repeat performance. You could bend me over this desk and tell me what a naughty girl I’ve been.”

“Nice try, Hawke. I know your interests lie elsewhere these days.” He couldn’t help his lip curling in disdain, and of course his guest noticed, her brow arching.

“Jealousy, Cullen, really? How trite.”

“Not jealousy,” he muttered. “Concern.”

“You watch your mages, and I’ll watch mine.”

“A fine job you did with that.”

“I could say the same.” She produced a dagger, the wicked edge gleaming, and began to clean under her fingernails. Despite her air of carelessness he could see his words had hit home, and he regretted his harshness. But Maker damn him, the man had destroyed half the city in his madness and she dared to shelter him?

“Just tell me you’re not in danger.”
“Have you ever known me not to be in danger?” she retorted. “I’m not afraid of Anders. He wouldn’t hurt me...at least, the one time he tried we kicked his arse. And those were unique circumstances.”

“Forgive me for saying so, Hawke, but you are the kind of woman who attracts unique circumstances.”

“You may be right.” She glanced over her shoulder toward the window. “Living in this blasted city doesn’t help. You were at the Ferelden circle, right?”

Cullen stiffened. “You know I was.”

“So was Anders. And as thin as the veil was there, he says it’s a thousand times worse here. And that was before...well.” Her nose wrinkled in annoyance. “It’s a miracle we’re not all mad.”

“Aren’t we?” he replied softly, and they shared a joyless laugh.

“Drink?” Hawke fished out a bottle of brandy and two glasses from a drawer, and he accepted before remembering that this was his desk. “Anyway, I’ve come to say goodbye.”

“How...?” Cullen hadn’t shared the news with his superiors yet - hadn’t, in fact, even gone as far as accepting the position. “I’m not leaving for a while yet.”

“You too, hey? Maybe we aren’t mad after all.” She clinked her glass against his with a force just short of shattering. “I meant me. I’m getting out of here before the wrath of the Chantry falls on us all. An Exalted March it may not be, but the heat is coming, and myself and my gaggle of apostates need to make ourselves scarce before then. Why I’m telling you this...”

“Because you see me as toothless, same as you always have.”

Unexpectedly, she took his hand and squeezed it. “Certainly not. You choose your battles wisely, that’s all. More so without old stone-face Meredith breathing down your neck. You managed to snatch my sister out from under my nose, didn’t you...?”

“Hawke.”

“All in good fun, Knight-Captain. But you haven’t told me where you’re going.”

“No, I haven’t.” Unconsciously his hand went to his pocket, the missive warning of the pending collapse of the Nevarran Accord. This new Inquisition may not be the most stable of prospects, but the future of the templars was also looking increasingly shaky. If at least he could find something
to believe in...wasn’t that why he joined in the beginning? “It’s time to move on from Kirkwall.”

“Past fucking time, I’ll drink to that.” And she did, throwing her head back as she drained the glass. She was a beautiful woman, he thought, not for the first time. Could they have been good for each other? It seemed unlikely that he could be good for anyone, but compared to an unstable, murderous apostate...

“Anders is a good man.” She regarded him steadily. “He did a bad thing, an unforgivable thing...but he was lost. It happens to the best of us at times.”

Flustered by her apparent insight into his thoughts, he cleared his throat in embarrassment. “Yes, well. You and I know what it’s like to kill. But we choose our targets a little more wisely.”

“Such as a Circle full of captive mages?” Sensing the return of a well-trodden argument, she held her hands up in conciliation. “Let’s not do this. We don’t want to end up shagging again, after all.”

“Not a chance, Hawke.” Not for the first time, he wondered if she knew that she was the last woman he’d been with. While she was off indulging in some tortured love affair with a wanted man, he may as well have taken a vow of chastity. The lyrium withdrawal was almost a welcome distraction. And there it was in vivid flashback, her pale thighs, the taste of her, the clench of her bearing down around him...it didn’t help when she unexpectedly pulled him into an embrace, her lips pressing against his clean-shaven cheek.

“Farewell, Cullen.” Finishing with a punch to his shoulder, she sauntered to the door. “We might meet again someday, when we least expect it. Hopefully not in fucking Kirkwall.”

When she was gone he took his own seat, still carrying her warmth. He poured himself another brandy and collected the implements of letter writing from his desk drawers.

Seeker Pentaghast, he began. Further to your correspondence, I would be interested in meeting when you are next in Kirkwall...
Alyse Hawke was suitably tall for a hero, Juliet thought. Apart from that there was little about the woman that resembled Varric’s telling - hair more brown than raven, eyes more green than blue, a dusting of freckles over the bridge of her nose on skin that the book described in somewhat fawning terms as “flawless alabaster.”

She said as much to the dwarf, and he shrugged.

“She's been in hiding, Freckles. What was I going to do, help them design the wanted poster?”

“I didn't think she'd be so…” Sad, was the word that came to mind when she looked down at the rogue hunched over the battlements. “Serious.”

A flicker of pain crossed Varric’s face. “Yeah, well. That's not creative license. That's what life on the run with the most hated apostate in Thedas will do to you.”

She was real, then, the wise-cracking, irreverent Champion of Varric’s tales. Juliet was struck by the sudden need to draw her out, if only for his sake. She looked at the darkening sky - she had no engagements for the next few hours, and she knew the Inquisition’s liquor supply had been moved into what would shortly become the new tavern…

“Do you think she'd join us for a drink?” she asked the dwarf, and he grinned wolfishly.

“I know she hasn't changed that much.” He nodded towards Hawke. “Why don't you ask her?”

That was how they came to be gathered around a barrel in a dusty space off the courtyard, pouring over-large quantities of Chasind sack mead into a motley assortment of vessels.

Hawke took a long, appreciative sniff from her tankard. “If I’d known this was the quality of Inquisition drinks, I’d have joined sooner.”

“It’s not, trust me,” Varric said, his legs dangling over the edge of an upturned cask. “Freckles has pilfered the good stuff for us. Does Flissa approve?”

“Flissa?” Juliet scoffed. “Save the life of a perfectly good bartender and she turns around and becomes a Chantry sister. How’s that for gratitude?”

Bull had been enlisted to help sort through the heavy stacks of supplies, and now he grunted appreciatively. “I’ve had bartenders and Chantry sisters,” he mused, “can’t say I’ve ever had both. Well, I’ve had both, just not, you know, the same person…” The Qunari fell silent, musing on the possibilities, and Hawke nudged Juliet.

“You’re right,” she said in an undertone, “he is a horde,” and Juliet saw the corner of Bull’s mouth twitch upwards.

“So, Hawke. I hear you’ve killed a few dragons.” His eye lit up. “What kind?”

“Oh, you know…” She gestured vaguely. “Large, angry.”
“There’s this one in the Hinterlands, Ferelden Frostback. Damn near kicked our asses a couple of times. Any tips?”

“Try not to die.”

He nodded ponderously, playing dumb. “I can use that. And you killed the Arishok?” At her wary expression he held his hands up. “Hey, no hard feelings. I never knew the guy. How did that go down?”

“Not like you might have read,” she sighed with a long-suffering glare for Varric. “Let's just say I didn't feel very heroic.”

“Dashing, ducking, dodging, sword sweeps too close, Maker, he's going to kill me…Isabela owes me a drink.”

“Isabela still owes me a drink.” Hawke stared flatly at Cole. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Oh, this is Cole. Kid, this is Hawke, but I guess you already know that.”

“Was he…not here a second ago, or am I drunker than I think I am?”

“Yeah, he does that. He's a spirit,” Varric explained awkwardly. “We think.”

“Well that's fucking great. I love spirits.”

Cole was quiet, staring at Hawke from beneath his hat. Juliet knew the boy's insights could be discomfiting, but she was compelled to defend him. “He's not dangerous. At least, not if you're on our side.”

“Where have I heard that before?” There was little animosity behind Hawke’s words, but she hated the tired resignation in the older woman's voice.

“Why don't you come sit with me, Cole?” She shuffled across as far as she could; the boy's hat took up more room than he did. “So it sounds like parts of Varric’s book were…”

“Total bullshit?”

“Hey!” the dwarf protested. “A few details were changed to protect the innocent, that's all.”

Hawke snorted. “Well I'm glad you protected them, whoever they were.”

“The first draft was closer to the truth,” Varric said with a wink. “I tried to get it published as a serial in the Randy Dowager but they said it was too salacious.”

This finally made her laugh out loud. “Hawke Fucks Everyone: A Tale of the Champion.”

“Hey, now,” he said. “You didn't fuck everyone.”

“True.” She began to count on her fingers. “Not you. Or Sebastian…not for lack of trying, mind you…Aveline…”

“Merrill,” the dwarf supplied helpfully.

Eyes averted, Hawke took a long pull of her drink.

“Hawke?”
Reddening, she shrugged.

“Hawke.”

“Hmm?”

“You and Daisy?”

“Just once,” she mumbled.

“Maker’s breath, Hawke!”

“Merrill is an adult, capable of making her own decisions…”

“I know. That’s why I’m surprised she went for you.”

“I’m wounded.”

“Was this before or after Curly?”

“You know…” She drummed her fingers on the tabletop. “It’s hard to say. Things are a little hazy around that time.”

“Wait.” Juliet sat up straighter. “Curly? As in…?”

“The very same, Freckles,” Varric confirmed, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “I guess there’s working equipment under all that plate after all.” Her blush only served to encourage him. “How was he, Hawke?”

“Varric! A lady never tells.”

“So…”

“Outstanding.” She glanced at Juliet in a manner entirely too shrewd for comfort. “Of course I couldn’t tell you what he’s like in bed…”

Varric shook his head in mock disapproval. “Hazy, she says.”

Cole frowned, glancing from Juliet to Hawke. “She wants to know -”

“Cole,” Juliet said quickly, “why don’t you see if anyone needs help.”

“But you need help,” he protested, confused. “It’s been too long since -”

“Not now, Cole!”

She was sorry to see the hurt on the spirit’s face, before he was abruptly gone. Hawke stared around in bewilderment.

“What’s he a spirit of, exactly?”

“Embarrassment,” she muttered.

“You’re staring again, boss.”
Juliet shook herself out of the trance she'd fallen into. “Am not.” Reluctantly she dragged her eyes away from where Cullen briefed the scouts for their journey. “Where's Varric?”

“I'm right here!” came the annoyed answer. “Honestly, if you weren't busy undressing the Commander with your eyes -”

“I'm on a horse!” she protested. “If you were saddled up and ready to go like the rest of us, I'd have seen you earlier.”

“Forgive me if I'm not in a hurry to gamble my life.” The dwarf scowled at his rangy Highland pony, and the mount returned his glare. He began the undignified process of climbing onto the fractious animal’s back.

“If you'd just admit that would be easier from a crate…”

Varric only grunted in response, then howled in outrage as Bull’s massive hand took him by the collar and hauled him into the saddle. “Maker's breath, Tiny, are you trying to get me killed?”

Sera grinned in the way that promised a terrible joke had just occurred to her. “If anyone’s saddled up and ready to go it's you, Inky.”

Juliet glared. “That doesn't even make sense.”

“Course it does,” the elf insisted. “Speaking of which…”

“Inquisitor.” Smiling broadly, Cullen made his way over to them. “All prepared?”

She shot a quick look of warning at Sera. “I think so, Commander. I'm sure Harding will have thought of everything.”

He nodded, absently rubbing the nose of her Ferelden Forder. “What do we know about this Fairbanks, exactly?”

“You've read the same reports as the rest of us, Cullen.” She found herself distracted by the lewdest of thoughts. Hawke and Cullen…the Champion’s fingers buried in his curls, his lips parted against her pale neck, bodies grinding together in the damp Kirkwall heat. She could just picture his face the moment he -

“Freckles?” Varric’s smug amusement broke through her reverie. “You're drooling,” he said in an undertone.

“Shut up,” she muttered.

“Inquisitor?”

“Not you,” she assured Cullen. The horse whinnied and shook her head, and Juliet leaned to stroke her neck.

“You're looking very confident in the saddle these days,” he observed. “Perhaps we might ride together some time, when you return?”

Behind his back Sera's eyes bulged, and Juliet was sorely tempted to freeze her mouth shut before she could blurt out her thoughts.

“I didn't take you for a horseman,” she answered politely.
His laugh was warm and unexpected. “Oh, I'm a foot soldier through and through. I only ride for pleasure.”

Varric was struck by a sudden coughing fit.

“Well in that case, I'd be delighted.” Maker, suddenly it seemed a lot warmer in the courtyard. She offered her hand and he clasped it, golden eyes meeting hers with a hint of…what? There was no time to analyse before he released her, his fingertips barely brushing her thigh before returning to the pommel of his sword.

“Maker watch over you, Inquisitor.” She had half expected a stammered apology, but there was no acknowledgement of the strangely familiar touch. Just a small bow before he strode away. A curve to his lips like just maybe, he'd known exactly what he was doing.

“I mean, are you talking about horses or not?” Sera was saying as they made their way over the bridge. “Cos if it was me saying that stuff, or Bull, or probably Dorian, it'd be definitely about fucking. But when it's him -”

“Horses,” Juliet said quickly. “He's talking about horses.”
Chapter Notes

Oh my god. Oh my god. I'm back. I had to leave the country without my kid to get it done, but I wrote a chapter. I hope it was worth it!

I will do my best not to leave another year between chapters.

It was a scene at once strange and familiar: the courtyard of broken stones, patchy clumps of coastal grass swaying in a breeze Solona could not feel.

Amaranthine. But imbued with the unearthly light of the Fade, the subtle warp and shiver at the edges of her vision that told her she was dreaming.

A tiny girl sat in the sparse shade provided by the courtyard wall, a fat brown plait hanging over her shoulder. Her clothes were threadbare and oversized, her boots scuffed.

The doll she cradled was likewise shabby: little more than a wooden head atop a straw-stuffed body, the whole thing wrapped in swaddling grubbied by the small hands of countless orphans. Its painted face was trapped in a permanent expression of serene sleep.

Alone beneath the wall the girl hummed a lullaby to which she'd long forgotten the words, cradling the baby in her arms. She smiled as she reverently touched its cheeks and rosebud mouth, kissed its unfeeling forehead, and in that moment her solemn, freckled face became beautiful.

“Solona!”

Solona jumped, startled, but it was the little girl who was the target of the Chantry sister's attention. The woman reached down and took the doll from her unresisting hands.

“That's not for you.”

The child turned blue-grey eyes upward. “I'm sorry, Sister.”

The woman's expression softened. “It's for the best,” she said, and Solona thought she spoke to convince herself as much as the child. “Best you don't dream of things you can't have.”

The solemn girl nodded. She didn't understand why she couldn't play with the doll, but she understood well enough the otherness that set her apart, the whispers of mage, the barbs thrown by children who understood its meaning no better than she.

“This hurts you. Why?”

This time an unexpected voice came from behind her, and Solona spun around with a spell at the ready.

The entity she faced looked like no demon she'd ever seen; it shimmered like a wisp, gently pulsating and reforming as if struggling to take on a more human form.
“Did I frighten you?” The voice was gentle, not recognisably male or female. “I am sorry. I...I felt your pain.”

“Are you a demon?” She kept the lightning dancing at her fingertips and the creature danced away, shivering in alarm.

“I don't think so.”

“That's hardly reassuring.” Solona felt the presence of the arcane warrior in her memories, a mixture of affront and amusement. She, of all people, should recognise this for what it was. “A spirit,” she said carefully. “Is that what you are?”

“Spirit…” It tested the word, and as it did so it seemed to become more solid. “Yes, I think that is what I am.”

“Of what?” Trusting in her memories, Solona let the spell disperse.

“Of what,” it repeated. “I don't understand.” An insubstantial arm rose, a finger seeming to point to the little girl who was now idly plucking at strands of grass. “She is you.”

“Yes.” Looking at her, Solona felt a lump in her throat, a knot of old pain.

“But smaller?”

“Younger,” she corrected.

The spirit wavered, digesting this information. “Not for you,” it said slowly. “What is not for you? A…” There was a pause, and she felt the slightest brush against her consciousness. “Doll?”

“Did you just take that word from my head?” she demanded.

The spirit wavered violently. “No!” it exclaimed. “I didn't take it. It's still there.”

“That's not what I -” She sighed. “Please, if you need to know something, just ask.”

The spirit brightened. “What is **mage**?”

She refrained from asking where it had come by the word. “A person who can use magic. Someone with a strong connection to the Fade.”

“The Fade. This…” The spirit seemed to turn in a circle. “...is the Fade.”

“You didn't know that?”

“It doesn't look like anywhere I've been before.”

“That's because it's my dream.” Thankfully, it didn't seem to need dreams explained right now. “Where did you come from?”

Another shiver of uncertainty shook the spirit. “I felt your pain.”

“You're...a spirit of pain? Do you feed off pain?” She'd never heard of such a thing in her studies at the Circle, but it sounded more like a demon than a benign spirit.

“No.” Motes of light scattered, coalescing back into a form that looked more and more human. “Mages aren't allowed things?” it persisted. “What things?”
“Well...most things. Possessions. Family. Children. Lovers.” She tugged on the end of her braid absently, and watched her younger counterpart doing the same thing. If they'd been wrong, she thought. If you hadn't been a mage... What would her life have looked like, outside the Circle? Freedom,” she added quietly.

At this, the spirit bristled. “You should be free!” it protested. “Everything should be free.” Agitated, it swirled around her. “Why aren't you free?”

“Because they think we're dangerous.”

“Are you?”

Solona thought of Jowan. Of Uldred. Of herself, cloaked in storms with the fire of battle in her veins, shearing down her enemies like so many blades of grass. “We can be,” she admitted.

But like a kitten distracted by a blown leaf, the spirit had moved on.

“Lovers,” it pondered. The orphanage melted away, and in its place was a forest clearing where two men sparred. No, a man and an elf, lithe and quick with daggers flashing, while the broad shouldered man parried with a heavy shield and swung a cloth-wrapped blade.

“You've been in my head again!” she accused.

“I'm sorry,” said the spirit. “I wasn't trying to.”

“I'm not sure that makes me feel better.” She watched the two clash and retreat, partners in a violent, athletic dance. “But they are. Were. At different times. My lovers.” She waved a hand towards Alistair, now slapping the elf good-naturedly on the back before he began to remove the padding from his father's longsword. “Just the one now.”

The spirit cocked its head, an oddly human gesture. “You were allowed things. People. The rules can change, then?”

She thought of her release from the tower. Lovers she had had, friends to ease the pain of Jowan's betrayal. Even a few possessions, but whether they belonged to her or the Wardens she couldn't say.

Then she thought of the looming Landsmeet. The question of succession, and what that might mean for herself and Alistair. And if against all odds they could stop the Blight in its tracks there was still the taint in her blood. No child for her, and as for freedom...what was it, anyway?

“I don't know.” She couldn't even say if the rules had changed for her, let alone...

A pair of mages shuffled by, and suddenly she was in the windowless corridors of the Circle Tower. She'd saved them from Uldred and from Cullen's wrath, but they were prisoners now as surely as they ever had been.

Once she hadn't looked for the possibility of freedom; now the thought of returning to behind those stone walls filled her with a cold panic. “I don't know how they can change. People are so afraid.”

A templar passed. A strong, young man, yet he seemed weighed down by his armour. His visored gaze passed over Solona and somehow she could feel the scowl marring his handsome face. Beneath his gauntlets she knew a white-knuckled hand gripped his sword pommel.

The spirit regarded him sorrowfully. “They broke him,” it murmured. “He's ashamed, and in his
shame he blames you. He knows it's not your fault, but he doesn't know he knows it.” Luminous eyes turned towards her. “It isn't your fault.”

“I know that,” she snapped, even as a voice deep down muttered a familiar litany: **if you'd been there to defend them; if you'd seen it coming; if you'd kept your distance as you should, not allowed him to hope...not allowed yourself to hope. Not for you, never for you.**

Angry, she turned on the spirit. “What are you? Digging in my head and pulling things out - how is that different to what they did to Cullen? What do you want?”

It wavered again, and the eyes that hadn't been there a minute ago blinked slowly.

“I want to understand,” it said. “I want to help.”

**Denerim, 9:30 Dragon Age**

Fat drops of rain on canvas woke her. The bumpy forest floor could be felt through the straw of her bedroll, but there were no stone walls and curving corridors. No Cullen with his accusing stare. Just a comfortably large shape beneath the blankets and the slow, regular breathing of a man asleep.

*What about you? Are you for me, or just something more they can take away?*

She raised a hand, fingertips nearly touching the golden skin of his back before she let it fall. Agitated, she sat up and rubbed her gritty eyes.

*Just a dream,* she told herself. But from as long as she could remember she had been told there was no such thing as just a dream, not for her. These days if it wasn't the riddles of the Fade it was the Archdemon. The slowly building roar of the horde, a baleful gaze turned in their direction, seeking, hunting…

In the half-light she found her brush and untied the braid that hung over her shoulder, quick fingers teasing the strands apart before she began working the rough bristles through her hair.

“Soap,” she muttered to herself. She had found she could ease some of her trepidation about heading back to Denerim by thinking of the supplies they could pick up once they were there, some of them luxuries they'd gone without for weeks. “Honey.” Leliana liked it in her tea. “Salt. Armour.” Wade had promised a new set fashioned from drakeskin. “Spices.”

“Mmm.” There was a stirring behind her. “And cheese.”

“We have a gigantic wheel of cheese still to eat.”

“Ah, but do we have a spare?” The blankets shifted away as Alistair sat up, and strong arms encircled her waist. “See,” he murmured in her ear. “I'm thinking ahead.”

“You are a thinker,” she said, immediately regretting her words. Alistair still had a habit of acting foolish as a means of self-protection, until he had almost begun to think himself stupid. If she wasn't careful it was too easy to fall into the trap of playing along. “What else do we need?”
She felt him shrug. “Apart from Loghain's head? I don't know.” His lips found her neck in a way that was wholly distracting. “You're the leader.”

“Maybe, but you're the -”

Heir to the throne, she had been about to say. But there was time enough to speak about that in Denerim. She didn't want him growing sullen and evasive, not now with his back pressed against her chest and warm breath in her ear. “Expert,” she said. “On Denerim.”

“Expert, am I?” He tugged the brush free from her fingers. “Let me do that for you.”

She would hardly complain. She closed her eyes as he worked through the thick fall of chestnut hair, deftly taming the snarls and tangles left by travel.

“Mmm. How are you so good at this?”

“Oh, I'm an expert at many things, my lady.” She rolled her eyes at his self-deprecating tone. “Raised in the stables, remember? Speaking of which...is this a horse brush?”

“It is not!” She made as if to scratch it from him, but his arm easily outreached hers as he inspected the brush.

“Are you sure? Oh well, you have a lovely mane. I may as well continue.” He added in an undertone, "Not a bad tail, either."

“I can kill you with my mind, you know.”

“And have to go back to brushing your own hair? You'd never do it.” He grew quiet for a time, his free hand trailing through her locks as he went. “Why is it that everybody else gets golden mirrors, and little stone statues, and fancy spirits and dirty books, and you - the leader of us all - are here combing your hair with this horse brush?”

“It's not a -”

“Why don't you get nice things?”

“I have your rose.”

“That was mostly dead when I gave it to you - or are you keeping it alive with the powers of your mind?”

“It's the thought that counts.”

“Well then,” he said, “I think you deserve something for yourself. Something nicer than a dead flower.”

“I have you.” For now. “You're nicer than a dead flower.”

“You and your extravagant compliments,” he joked, but she could tell he was pleased. “You're making me blush. But I'm serious. We should get you something in Denerim. Something for yourself.”

“I have my armour.”

“Nope. Doesn't count. It's functional.”
“So is this brush,” she pointed out, and he snorted.

“Barely.”

“We can't afford anything that doesn't help the Blight -”

“Did I mention mirrors, boots -”

“Gifts. In exchange for help freely given. And I found half of that stuff. Anyway, there's no point in -” She fell silent, biting her lip.

“In what?” he asked quietly. “No point in what, Solona?”

She turned her face away, muffling her voice in her shoulder. “No point in giving me things I can't keep.”

His hands fell still, and there was silence. Then, “Look at me.”

Alistair's jaw was set, his eyes pained. “I told you,” he said softly. “Back in the beginning. You don't belong to the Circle any more. Nobody can take anything from you.”

“That was before,” she said obstinately. “When there were more Wardens. What if -”

“No.” There was a rarely heard hint of steel in Alistair's voice. “Nothing's changed. They'd have to come through me first, and I'm…”

King. It hung heavy in the air, but neither of them had the nerve to utter it.

“Yours,” he finished. “As long as you want me.”

Solona blinked back tears, fingers barely trembling as she touched his cheek. “You're in trouble then,” she said hoarsely. “Because I want you always.”

Alistair nodded. “Well then. It seems we're doomed.” He fingered a lock of her unbound hair. “It looks like we're done here. There's one problem, though…”

“Which is?”

Falling back to the bedroll, he dragged her down on top of him, rolling so she was pinned beneath his weight. He smiled, with a gleam in his eyes she had come to know well. And that low voice, the one that made her feel as if her body was melting from the waist down.

“I have definite plans to get it tangled again.”
Cullen (the look of a templar)

Chapter Notes

Back again!

This chapter contains a smattering of random OCs and traces of Jim. It's been written on a phone at a rate of about two paragraphs a day so hopefully it's coherent - please let me know if you spot any typos!

TW for discussion of past rape.

Haven, 9.42 Dragon Age

This was not a good day.

How had he forgotten how Maker-damned cold it could get in Ferelden? Padded in far too many layers of lambswool beneath his armour - could he even swing a sword if needed? - the wind still stung his nose and made his ears ache. His breath plumed in the frigid air.

*Have you ever tried herding cats?* Hawke had asked him once. Well if anything was like herding cats, the Conclave was. Or cats and dogs. No, worse...foxes and chickens.

But who were the foxes and who the chickens? He abandoned the metaphor. Mages and templars were quite enough for now. The mages seemed evenly divided between fear and cocky arrogance, and as for the templars... it seemed that for many of them, order and discipline had collapsed along with the Circles. Some of the men and women here were barely a cut above those roaming the Hinterlands, where it was told apostates and templars alike had turned to banditry and worse.

His forces were spread thin, so far maintaining the fragile peace. Makeshift accommodations had sprung up in the previous weeks, every inn, boarding house and private residence for miles around packed to bursting, members of the various factions forced into uncomfortable proximity. So it was at the gate into Haven where footsore travellers formed a bottleneck as they entered the village. Cullen hoped their visible presence would be enough to deter troublemakers - if not, well at least a fight might warm him up a little.

“You look frozen, Cullen.”

He startled, and managed to pass it off as a violent shiver. Leliana could move with unnerving silence when she wanted to, which seemed to be frequently.

“It seems I underestimated the cold,” he muttered.

“Perhaps Josephine could find you something -”

“Thank you,” he said hurriedly, “but I have someone working on it.” As resourceful as the Antivan was, he was quite doubtful that their tastes in clothing would align.
“I thought you grew up near here?” It was the closest allusion either of them had made to the past, happy to maintain the pretence of never having met before Cullen joined the service of the Divine.

He thought of the winters in Honnleath, the snow piled high on the shoulders of the golem in the town square. Breath pluming in the air of the training yard. The chill of the stone floor beneath his knees at Kinloch Hold. Throat parched and hands cold as ice after days without lyrium…

“Yes.” Inside his leather gloves, his fingers were so numb they may as well have been blocks of stone. How long since his last dose? He had lost count somewhere on the Waking Sea. "Perhaps Kirkwall has made me soft."

The spymaster scanned the crowd, alert for trouble. “Oh, I doubt anyone was softened by Kirkwall,” she said quietly.

“And Most Holy?” he asked, moving on quickly. “Is she settling in?”

That too-knowing gaze rested on him for a moment. “She is comfortable. Thank you.”

A lilting Orlesian voice caught his notice amongst the mutter of the crowd. “The Hero of Ferelden came through here.” The speaker was a wisp of a girl, brown eyes large in a pale, gaunt face. She and her companion both wore threadbare robes, and the wind that whipped her dark hair around her face must have cut straight to her bones, but she stared about her as if the muddy track and icy slopes were the gardens of Halamshiral.

“Of course.” The boy shared her colouring and her half-starved look; it was all too common amongst the new apostates. He clutched a cheap wooden staff with one hand, and the girl's arm with the other. “We are in Ferelden, it's hardly surprising.”

Cullen cleared his throat, looking anywhere but at Leliana. The spymaster inclined her head. “Until later, then.” She tugged her hood forward against the wind, and melted into the crowd as quickly as she had appeared.

“No, but this is where she found Andraste's sacred ashes,” the girl was saying. “Up in the Temple.”

“Do you really believe that?” the young man said, incredulity creeping into his voice. “Andraste's ashes here, after all this time? And the Hero of Ferelden being the one to find them?”

“It's true!” she said excitedly. “She found them and used them to cure the King's father.”

“Uncle,” Cullen said in the Common tongue without thinking, and both turned dark eyes in his direction. “Er, Arl Eamon. Was the King's uncle. Is.”

“You know Orlesian, ser knight?” The girl switched easily to a musically accented Common. Close up she was striking, her fever-bright eyes lending a light to her delicate features.

"I understand it," he clarified, "but I'm told my accent is incomprehensible."

"It is true though, what they say?"

They say many things. "That part, yes, I believe is true."

"See?" she said, and her companion shrugged. By now they were at the head of the line, and the Chantry scribe assigned to keep track of the visitors fixed an indifferent gaze on them.

“Your names?”
“Luc Gault,” the young man said. “And my sister, Caroline.”

“From the Val Chevaux Circle,” she offered, and Cullen couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

“You were in the same Circle? A brother and sister?”

“No.” Caroline looked fondly at her brother. “We found each other after the Circles fell. We hadn't seen each other in, oh…ten years, at least!”

Luc held tightly to his sister's arm. “I was in Montsimmard.”

She bit her lip, then asked in a rush, “Did you know the Hero of Ferelden, ser?”

“Fabricant, Caro. You cannot ask every person in Ferelden if they knew the Hero of Ferelden.”

Don't say it, Cullen. “I, er…” He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly as flustered as that green boy at Kinloch Hold. “I did, as it happens. A little.”

The girl's face lit up. “See?” she said to her brother. Turning back to Cullen, her eyes were bright with excitement. “Is it true that she was a Circle mage?”

“She was,” he confirmed, unable to suppress a tiny smile at the memory of quiet Solona Amell, a pile of books in her arms and her chestnut hair forever escaping its braid.

The brother's eyes narrowed, his hand gripping a fraction tighter to his sister's arm. “You have the look of a templar about you, ser.” It was said quietly, but Caro recoiled as if he had shouted.

“Luc!” she said in consternation. “What would make you say such a thing?”

“No, he's right,” Cullen admitted, seeing the colour drain from her face. “At least, I was. I'm no longer part of the Order.”

“Was,” the boy spat. “There is no was with you people. You can't stop being a templar any more than I can stop being a mage.” He shrugged off his sister's calming hand. “It's in your blood. Go on, deny it! What are you without your lyrium?”

“Luc.” Caro stepped between Cullen and her irate brother. “May we go in now, please?” She accepted their papers back from the scribe, crumpling them in her haste to tuck them back in her robes. “We're sorry to have bothered you, ser.”

Nonplussed, Cullen watched the pair hurry through the gate.

“Maker's breath,” he cursed. Turning to the scout who had appeared at his elbow, he demanded, “Am I so frightening?”

The man flinched. “No ser. Commander Cullen. Ser.”

He sighed. “Well? How did you get on?”

“Not well, Commander. Warm clothing is in high demand - people have come unprepared for the cold weather.” Realising what he had just said, the scout became flustered. “I mean - not to suggest, ser, that you were -”

“Never mind that,” Cullen snapped. He thought of the Orlesian siblings, shivering in their worn Circle robes. “I don't want you taking anything from those that need it more, do you understand? Reasonably priced garments are to be left for the Conclave guests, should they need them.” He
glared down at the scout. “Is there something more, er…”

“Jim,” the man supplied.

“Well?”

“No, ser.”

At that moment there was a commotion further down the line. “Apostates!” a commanding voice rang out, followed by the rasp of steel. Startled, many of the mages crowded closer to the gates. “Halt or die!”

Keen eyes scanning the crowd, Cullen identified the speaker as a grizzled Templar. His younger companions were doing their best to hold him back as he remained fixated on a group of startled mages, their robes identifying them as once belonging to the Starkhaven circle.

“What in the Maker’s…” Cullen began to push through the crowd, noting with some satisfaction that several of his soldiers had also responded quickly to the commotion. They moved with efficiency between the templars and mages, shepherding the Starkhaven contingent to a safe distance and speaking in low, calm voices. The templars had formed a protective ring around the old man, but as the soldiers' weapons remained sheathed they visibly relaxed.

“What's going on here?” Cullen demanded. A single glance at the old templar told him much of what he needed to know: the man's eyes were bleary and vacant, and as he put his sword away his gnarled hands shook.

"I'm - I do apologise. I thought…” He looked at the gawking crowd in confusion. "Who are all these people? There was something…”

"Peace, Ser Dalkeith." A dark-haired younger templar laid his hand on the old man's arm. "A few minutes more and we'll find our lodgings. A warm fire would be good, would it not?"

"I suppose, yes." He swayed slightly on his feet. "And then are we going home?"

"I'll handle this." Cullen dismissed his soldiers and approached the lyrium-addled man. "Ser Dalkeith, is it? My name is Cullen."

"Cullen?" The younger templar stepped forward. He frowned, seeing no Templar insignia on Cullen's armour. "Knight-Sergeant Bennick, from the Ostwick circle. Ser Dalkeith is our captain. Your reputation precedes you, Ser."

"I hope that's a good thing." Cullen nodded to the Knight-Captain, who had begun muttering to himself. "He commands you?"

Abashed, the man shook his head. "Not so much lately. But he was a fine captain in his day," he added defensively.

"And you thought it would be a good idea to bring him here?" Cullen's gesture encompassed the chaos of the crowd at the gates, many of whom were quite obviously mages.

"Look," Bennick said angrily, "he wasn't this bad when we set out." He glanced at his commanding officer and his shoulders slumped in defeat. "What were we going to do with him? The circle was the only home he knew. The Chantry might have taken him in, but until things are certain…” His voice dropped to a low pitch. "He could be any of us in a couple of decades. We can't just abandon him."
Cold hands. Dry throat. An ache that began at the back of his skull and throbbed, throbbed… suddenly Cullen couldn't bear the sight of the Knight-Captain a second longer.

*I will not become this. I will not.*

"Go on through," he said wearily. "You say you have lodgings?"

"Yes, ser."

"Then go there right away. And I don't want to see him at the Conclave, do you hear? Is there someone who can keep an eye on him?"

"I will." A grinning templar with a sandy beard stepped forward. "Millward, ser. I can't think of a better reason to miss all that dull talk. If there's ale and a fire to warm our toes, I'll see he doesn't wander."

"Good man." Turning to Dalkeith, Cullen clapped a hand on the old man's plated shoulder. "Maker watch over you, Knight-Captain."

Dalkeith stared blankly at him. "Not regulation armour," he muttered. "I won't write you up if it doesn't happen again."

"I appreciate it, ser." Cullen waved a soldier over. "See that they're escorted safely to their lodgings, and the mages to theirs. Via a different route, if you can manage it."

"Yes, Commander." The woman hesitated. "And if the mages don't have lodgings…?"

"Find them some. Give them my tent, I don't care." This Maker-damned headache. "It's not as if I'll be sleeping anyway," he muttered to himself as the templars trudged into Haven.

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Something must have been organised for the Starkhaven mages, because Cullen at last settled onto the rickety cot in his command tent, quite alone. It was barely less freezing in here than his post at the gates, but at least he was off his feet for now.

In the darkness his eyes sought out the heavy wooden trunk that contained his meagre belongings. He knew precisely where the case lay, tucked in a corner beneath a pile of neatly pressed tunics. A wooden case with the image of Andraste on the underside of the lid, and inside…inside…

He may yet end up mad even without the lyrium. Or a desperate shell of a man, like Samson. Would it hurt so much, just to take enough to ease the headaches? He had everything he needed to make a philter.

No. If nothing else, it was too bloody cold to leave the relative comfort of his furs. After what seemed like hours the warmth finally began to seep into his bones, and sleep finally claimed him.

*Cullen?*

It was Solona, yet not. Leaner, harder, clad in drakeskin armour instead of robes. But the same wide grey eyes, the hair pulled over her shoulder in an unruly braid. Freckles dusted the bridge of
her nose, and blood spattered the side of her face.

Maker, it's good to see you. He smiled. Are we going home now?

Oh, Cullen. She looked at him with pity in her eyes. This was my home. Following her sorrowful gaze he saw the grey walls of Kinloch, covered in blood and ichor and foul, pulsating gore. And look what they've done to it.

How did I get here? he asked her. I was... Where had he been? Solona... am I going mad?

Solona smiled, and a trickle of blood spilled from the corner of her mouth. You can't save them. You don't know what they've become.

Solona? Looking down, he saw with horror that his sword was buried in her belly, his hands slick with her blood. I didn't do this! I didn't... I don't remember. Did I?

She raised a hand and tenderly touched his face. Stay safe, she whispered as the light left her eyes, it will be over soon.

He woke in a tangle of furs, sweat freezing on his skin, and for a moment the confusion lingered as he sought out familiar surroundings in the darkness. It was the persistent throbbing in his head that brought him back to reality.

"It wasn't my fault," he said to the empty tent, his voice hoarse and strange to his ears. If only he believed it.

The tent flap twitched open, a hint of pre-dawn light sneaking in. "Ser?" came a hesitant voice from outside.

"What is it?" he said brusquely. The cot creaked in protest as he sat up, and the intruder cleared her throat.

"Sorry, ser, we thought you called out. Didn't mean to wake you, ser."

"You didn't." He threw his furs aside in annoyance. One more day until the Conclave began, one day less of everyone crammed cheek-to-jowl. If his nightmares were to worsen, he would rather it happened in more private quarters.

One more day herding cats.

"I've told you, Seeker. I don't know." Varric flashed a grin at Cullen as he trudged up to them, but Cassandra's glare never wavered from the dwarf.

"She is your friend, is she not?"

"Yes, but I haven't seen her in months. Half that time I've been your prisoner. And if she's with Blondie she's hardly going to advertise where she is." He shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. Do you keep tabs on all of your friends? Wait... do you have friends?"
Beneath her olive skin, the Seeker's cheeks burned red. "Of course I - shut up." Finally she acknowledged Cullen. "Commander Cullen. I trust the preparations are going smoothly?"

"As well as can be expected." Even given its popularity with pilgrims in recent years, the town was ill-equipped to deal with the surge in visitors. Forces they could scarce afford to spare were busy carting in wagon loads of rushes to spread on the slushy streets. "Is the Temple path adequate, do you think?" He squinted doubtfully up the mountainside.

Cassandra sniffed. "It was good enough for Most Holy."

"Divine Justinia is one woman," he countered, feeling vaguely blasphemous. "This is more like… several herds of cattle. In thin boots."

"Forgive me if I don't use that in my next book, Curly."

"I would greatly appreciate if you didn't."

"Don't you have something useful to do, Varric?" Cassandra all but snarled.

"Hey, I'm observing history." Varric smirked. "What could be more useful?"

"You could observe it down by the latrine pit," Cullen pointed out. "We could use more diggers."

"'Not Enough Latrines: A Story of the Conclave.' I think I'll pass." He raised an eyebrow. "But I suppose you need less people passing, not more."

Cassandra made a noise of disgust. "The path will suffice," she said. "We offered truce, not luxury."

"Just as well," Cullen muttered.

Making his farewells, he carried on up the muddy path. Mages and templars were not the only factions crowding the uneven streets; he spied Grey Wardens, bands of haughty Dalish elves, even a handful of Qunari towering above the crowd. That was enough to give any Kirkwall veteran pause, but their garb and casual attitude marked them as Tal-Vashoth. Mercenaries, most likely.

A peal of laughter caught his attention, and he turned to see a group of mages exiting an inn. He caught a glimpse of chestnut hair and a pair of wide grey-blue eyes, before she pulled on her hood and the group disappeared around a corner.

"Excuse me." Hurriedly skirting a group of nobles, Cullen nearly slipped on a patch of dirty ice in his rush to follow them. He found another narrow, crowded street. Everywhere he looked robes, heavy cloaks and hoods, the browns and greys and blacks of winter garb.

It was hopeless. He'd never find her. Not because of the cloaks, or the crowd, or any other reason except the fact that she was years dead. Cullen rubbed the back of his neck in consternation. "I am going mad," he muttered.

"Pardon, ser?"

"What?" He thought he heard a squeak from the soldier as he spun on his heel, glaring down at the man. "You again! Jem, was it?"

"Yes ser. I mean no ser, it's -"

"What in the Maker's name is that?" The man appeared to be cradling some sort of large, hairy
animal. He held it up for Cullen's inspection.

"It's for you, ser. Commander."

"I need a warm cloak, not a…what is that? A dog?"

"I, er, believe it's called a mantle, ser."

"Show me." Cullen shook out the offending item, which did indeed seem to be a garment of some kind. What was that, bear fur?

"It wasn't cheap, ser."

"No, I imagine not."

"There was a noble heading back to Val Royeaux - he didn't want to carry it. You said -"


The man shuffled from foot to foot. "You don't…need any help, ser? Putting it on?"

Cullen could feel the pounding in his skull begin to worsen. "Are you asking me," he said quietly, "if I need your help to dress myself?"

"Absolutely not, ser. No ser, very good ser." The man backed away, bumping into a mage who scowled at him before he dashed off.

Well. He did say warm, he reflected once he finally put the thing on, and it was that. Even his ears and nose felt almost normal. He would have to properly thank the man - Jeb? - when he next saw him. Any soldier who gave him a second look received his best glare.

"I do like your new mantle, Cullen," Josephine said in passing. "It makes you look like a lion."

"I was thinking more like a vulture," he grumbled, but he smiled to himself as he walked on.

That night he dreamed of Solona again, pursuing her down twisting streets until he finally caught her, and when she turned around her eyes were shut, her face and hair grey with ashes.

Look at me, he pleaded. Forgive me.

You said I was your shame. A tear ran down her cheek, leaving a dirty trail. Your sin.

I didn't mean it.

But you did. Her eyelids opened, and behind them instead of the grey blue of a sea in storm there was only emptiness, dust and ashes. Am I worthy now, Cullen? Now I'm dead? As she spoke he felt her vanish from his grasp, and looking down he saw crumbling ash where her arm had been.

Don't go.

A breeze stirred and she began to disintegrate faster. With a cry he grabbed for her shoulder, only for half her torso to collapse into nothingness. I'm already gone, she answered, and with a final gust
of wind she was, only so many specks of dust swirling in the air.

Greasy soot coated his skin and ash choked him, making him cough and retch. Stumbling to his hands and knees he found his limbs constricted and he fought desperately to free himself, only to become more and more tangled. All around was sooty darkness.

"Ser!"

Blankets. Furs and blankets were wound around his arms and legs where he lay on the oilcloth floor. The darkness was the dark of the tent at night, and his throat was not choked with soot, only dry as it had been since he stopped lyrium.

"I'm fine," he croaked. He felt around for the ewer of water, found it with a thud and a splash.

"Can I get you anything, Ser?"

"No," he answered curtly, then rethought. "Actually, water. Thank you."

Lyrium would make all this go away. Groaning, he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes.

It will be over soon.

Maker willing, let it be so.

"What is this about? " Cassandra's face was like thunder.

"I know as much as you do," Cullen replied, his mood no better. "Where is Leliana?"

"Here." The Chantry door cracked open, and she beckoned them inside. An elven scout stood with her, facing down the glares of both Cullen and the Seeker without fear.

"This had better be good," Cullen snapped. "We've had to put the Conclave into recess, you've called away the left and right hands of the Divine -"

"Cullen." Leliana held up a hand. "Charter?"

"We were told if there was trouble we should let you know right away, and keep it discreet," the woman said, looking Cullen directly in the eyes. "So that's what we did."

Cassandra's hand went to her sword pommel. "What sort of trouble?"

Leliana gave a small nod to Charter, who jerked her head towards the back of the building. "Follow me."

The room she led them to seemed to have been used for storage; a large table was propped up against the far wall, chairs and pews and other odds and ends stacked in piles around the edges. At opposite ends of the room were two chairs. In one an ashen-faced templar was being attended to by a healer, the side of his surcoat bright with blood.
In the other, guarded by two soldiers, was Luc Gault.

He raised sullen eyes to the intruders, looking away with a scowl when he saw Cullen.

"What happened?" Cassandra demanded.

"Little fucker stabbed me, that's what!" The templar winced. "Ambushed me round the back of the inn. I don't even know him!"

"Is this true?"

The mage shrugged.

"Either it is or it isn't," said Cullen sternly, and Luc hunched forward in his chair.

"Yes," he muttered.

"Why?"

Luc shot his victim a look of pure venom. "He raped my sister."

"I didn't! I've never met you or your stupid sister."

"What's your name?" Leliana asked the templar.

"Frederic Suchet. From the Val Chevaux circle."

Val Chevaux? Cullen glanced sharply at Luc.

"And you?"

When the mage didn't answer, Cullen supplied, "Luc." He watched Suchet for a reaction. "Gault, wasn't it?" If it were possible, the templar's face became even more bloodless. "You know the name?"

"There was a Gault in my Circle," he said reluctantly.

Cassandra glowered at him. "And did you have...relations...with this mage?"

He squirmed under the Seeker's attention. "I'm no rapist."

"Liar!" Luc directed a heated stream of Orlesian at the templar, who responded in kind. A soldier put a warning hand on the mage's shoulder when he would have launched out of his chair.

"Enough." Leliana's quiet voice cut through the noise like steel, and the men fell silent. She advanced on Gault. "Have you any idea what you've put in jeopardy? The Conclave is under truce. Any violence could trigger a bloodbath."

"My sister -"

"Is lucky to have survived the war so far. I promise you, individual complaints will be dealt with. But you cannot simply take the law into your own hands. Everyone will suffer if we do not find a way forward."

"In whose hands do we place justice, then? It has gone on long enough -"

"And it ends here," she said emphatically. "If both sides can put aside the past long enough to reach
an accord. Your grievance is not forgotten, just postponed."

There was a commotion outside, a voice familiar to most of them blustering, "I must insist that you wait! I demand -"

Cullen did a better job than Cassandra at hiding his distaste, the Seeker rolling her eyes before Caroline Gault burst in, Chancellor Roderick hot on her heels.

"You cannot simply -"

"Luc!" Caro rushed to her brother. "Have they hurt you?" She knelt and took his face in her hands. "What were you thinking?"

"I did it for you," he said dully.

She pressed her forehead to his. "You stupid boy."

"Hey." The wounded templar attempted to get to his feet, the healer and his light-headedness conspiring to force him back down. "Tell him," he insisted. "Tell him it's not what he thinks."

Caro hesitated a long while, her eyes closed. Finally she released her brother and got unsteadily to her feet.

"Not what he thinks?" She turned to Suchet and her voice was dangerously quiet. "How so?"

"Not rape," he insisted. "You weren't unwilling."

She was silent, staring him down.

"You didn't say no," he said defensively.

"You didn't ask."

"I didn't - you could have fought. Screamed. Something!"

"Fought?" Her voice trembled, her fists clenched at her sides. "How? Should I have tried to overpower you, with your sword and plate?" She looked him up and down. He was easily a foot taller than the tiny mage. "Or used magic? Against a templar?"

"You didn't say no!"

"You didn't ask!" she spat. "You can't be so stupid as to not know the power you had. I laughed at first when you cornered me. I hoped you were just messing around, but then you grabbed me and pushed me to the floor - I thought you would crush me. I thought I would die."

He looked away in shame, but she wasn't done.

"I can still feel your breath in my ear, and your armour digging into me, and it hurt, but not as much as..." She gulped, looking for a moment as if she might throw up. "I wanted someone to come and catch you, and stop you, but then they would see me as well..."

Tears were spilling freely down her cheeks now, and she angrily dashed them away with the back of her hand. "And then I wished you would kill me, that you'd crack my skull on the floor or choke me to death, and I wanted to fight back to make you hurt me but I couldn't move, I couldn't move, and all I could do was let you finish."
"I think that's enough -" Chancellor Roderick began, but Cassandra rounded on him.

"Let. Her. Speak."

Suchet was silent, staring at his feet.

"Then you thanked me, and you left, and all I wanted was to disappear. To stop existing. But I had to go on, and I had to see you every day. Every fucking day."

He ran his hands through his hair. "It wasn't my fault," he said. "You didn't stop me."

Caro laughed, a cold, humourless laugh. "You can't be so ignorant, can you? You can't not know the power you have? You don't ask, you just take, and take, and take. Our freedom, and our families, and our right to choose! Well not anymore. We don't have to be afraid of you now."

Cullen tasted ashes in the back of his throat, his thoughts as always going to Solona. What would she do if you kissed her? he had wondered, so many years ago.

"Do you want to know why my brother attacked you?" the mage asked.

"Caro," her brother said, "please."

"Because he knew I meant to, so he got in first. And you should thank the Maker that he did." Her voice shook with anger. "I wouldn't have stabbed you once. I wouldn't have stopped until you were dead, and maybe not even then. They'd have had to kill me to make me stop."

Finally she seemed to recall their audience, and a stunned silence settled over the room, all parties avoiding each others' eyes. Leliana finally spoke up.

"There will be a process," she said. "Once the Conclave is over, there will be a way for people to seek reparation."

"And my brother?" Caro's brave mask faltered. "What will happen to him?"

"I am sorry. He has confessed to his crime, now justice must take its course."

"Justice." She shook her head. "Whose justice? The Chantry's?"

"No. We are in Ferelden, and their law must prevail." A fond smile softened her sharp features. "King Alistair's justice is not weak, but it is fair. If you wish it, your story will be heard."

Caro rubbed at her red-rimmed eyes, seeming all at once terribly young, and terribly weary. "Can I stay with him? Please?"

"Absolutely not," said Chancellor Roderick. "What sort of message -""

"Yes." Leliana put back her hood. "Of course you can."

She glanced at the templar. "And him…?"

"Until the Conclave is over, he will be kept under our supervision."

"What?" Suchet exclaimed. "I am a templar, this Conclave is under truce!"

"You are accused of a crime," Leliana said. "It must be investigated, and we must maintain the peace we have worked to protect." She nodded to Charter. "Once he is healed, take him away."
The elf was deaf to the young man's protestations. "Where should I put them?"

"If I remember correctly," Leliana said, her nose wrinkling in delicate distaste, "there are cells beneath the Chantry. Make sure they are clean, first. I don't know if they have been used since the previous tenants...departed."

"Right you are, Nightingale."

"Come then," she said. "We should get back."

Cassandra looked ready to punch someone. Anyone. "A moment." She crossed to where Caro crouched at her brother's side, their hands clasped tightly. "How old are you?"

The two exchanged a glance filled with trepidation. "Eighteen," Luc said hesitantly. "Or thereabouts."

"We had no birthdays in the Circle," Caro explained when she raised an eyebrow. "We think we must have been around eight when they took us, but it's only a guess."

The Seeker looked at Suchet as if she wanted to say something, but finally she turned back to the mages.

"I am sorry this happened to you."

"I'm the one who was stabbed," the Templar muttered, and Cullen hastily stepped between he and Cassandra, who looked ready to finish the job.

"I'll handle this," he said. "You should get back to the Conclave." He looked down on the wounded man. Suchet was perhaps one-and-twenty, solidly built and square-jawed; he would perhaps be considered handsome if not for the scowl that currently marred his features.

"Merde!" he exclaimed as the healer spread an acrid-smelling salve on his side, and the man glared back at him.

"You can go," Cullen told the healer.

Suchet sat upright, flinching. "What? It still hurts!"

"Go," Cullen repeated, and the relieved healer shrugged and retreated. He was left studying the Templar. Finally he could stay silent no longer. "What were you thinking?" he demanded. "The most basic tenets of the Order, and you thought, what? They didn't apply to you?"

"She liked me," Suchet protested. "She wanted it, I swear."

"Did she say as much?" Cullen shook his head. "Even if she did, it doesn't matter. You were tasked to protect her!"

The templar's jaw clenched. "I just wanted...she was pretty. Friendly. When she stopped talking to me after, I thought - well, girls have regrets sometimes, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never forced myself on one."

"It wasn't like that!" he insisted. "Everybody does it!"

"No," Cullen said flatly. "They don't."
Suchet sat back heavily, wincing at the pain in his side. "Don't pretend you're so perfect," he growled. "I'll bet you've got secrets of your own."

Swallowing bile, Cullen turned on his heel and left the Chantry.

Outside he found he could breathe again. A fresh fall of snow had turned the muddy paths crisp and white, and although the glare aggravated his aching head, there was a peace to Haven without the relentless press of humanity around him.

Another few days of this just might drive him mad, he thought. Why, just this morning he again thought he'd seen - no. He was done chasing ghosts. She was dead and burned; Greagoir himself had seen the funeral pyre. Whatever cruel trick his eyes wanted to play on him, he would focus on the task at hand.

"We've done all we can here." Leliana startled him out of his reverie. "We need to start back."

"Can we keep this quiet, do you think?" They set off for the mountain path, snow crunching underfoot. "Should we?"

"The Conclave cannot be jeopardised," she replied softly. "As to whether we can keep it from becoming public, my people can be trusted. Roderick, on the other hand…"

"I suppose a cell is out of the question."

"Something more permanent, perhaps."

Cullen glanced sharply at her, then let out a nervous bark of laughter. Joking. She must be joking. "Yes, well…that would make Cassandra happy at least, although it might raise some awkward questions."

Leliana stopped, frowning. "Did you hear-"

The world exploded.

It was, Cullen thought later, as if all the sound had been sucked out of the air. Then a wave of heat and sound, throwing them off their feet as if swatted by a giant hand. Something hit Cullen's head with a dull thud and for a moment he lay stunned in suffocating darkness.

Was he blinded? Buried under rubble? When his wits returned he realised the thick fur mantle had become tangled around his head, and he freed himself to find the blue sky gone. In its place was a roiling mass of grey smoke, streaked through with flashes of sickly green.

For a dizzying moment he was back in Kirkwall as fragments of the Chantry rained down on the city. Then someone grabbed his arm and he spun, unsteady but ready to fight.

Leliana was shouting. At least that's how it seemed.

"I can't hear you!" he tried to say, but the ringing in his ears drowned out even his own voice.

"To the Chantry," she mouthed.
"We need to find out what's happening!"

She gestured up at the mountain. The summit was obscured by a cloud of ash and debris, quickly growing larger. It rankled to run from danger but he could hardly fight an avalanche with a sword.

Ash was drifting down softly by the time they reached safety. Inside, all was chaos. The ringing was finally beginning to subside but voices were muffled as if underwater. Cullen heard more than one person openly sobbing.

"It just exploded!" someone was saying. "I don't understand. The whole place just…who did this?"

"What place?" he demanded of the speaker, a wide-eyed dwarf. She gaped at him a moment before answering.

"The Temple. It was - there can't be anyone alive up there."

A rain of debris hit the roof like fine hail, dust finding its way in and setting those closest to the door to coughing. It lasted no more than a minute - it seemed that the explosion had petered out somewhat.

"Should we look outside?" a soldier asked Cullen.

Before he could answer, there came a pounding at the door. "Is anyone in there?" came the unmistakable voice of the Seeker. "Open up!"

He nodded, and the great wooden doors swung open to a cloud of swirling ash. Cassandra was coated in it, the only spots of colour her reddened eyes and a trickle of blood from a gash on her cheek.

"Demons," she gasped, leaning hard against the door frame. "Falling from the sky."

"The sky?" Cullen repeated dumbly. Had she suffered a blow to the head also?

"From the sky," she repeated irritably. "Coming out of…" Gesturing above her head, she searched for a word. "Rifts."

"Rifts?"

"Stop repeating everything I say, Cullen!" She peered into the dark of the Chantry. "Is Leliana with you?"

"I am here." She emerged from the crowd.

"Good," Cassandra said. "We must get to Most Holy."

"You should know…" Cullen began, then faltered. How could one break such news?

"The Temple is destroyed," Leliana said softly. "It seems unlikely there are any survivors."

Cassandra sagged for a moment, exhaling slowly as if in great pain. Then straightened, the steel returning to her spine. "We must see for ourselves."

"Agreed," said Cullen, "but how? What number of demons do we face? Is the path safe?"

"Some sections I passed were damaged by falling rocks. I imagine it is worse closer to the explosion. As to the demons, I do not know; we should assume the worst."
The worst? Cullen suppressed a shudder. The worst was unthinkable. But it was clear they must assemble all the forces that remained. "There will be wounded." He glanced at Cassandra's injury. "You were caught in the fallout - how bad was it?"

"Not comfortable," she answered drily, "but less severe than it seemed it would be. Still, if people were caught on steep parts of the mountain or those with unsteady footing, they may have fared badly."

People had begun to emerge from the surrounding buildings, coughing and covering their mouths against the floating ash.

"We have forces that weren't at the Conclave." Cullen searched the crowd for a soldier and pointed at the first he saw. "You, gather the troops here. Whoever you can find. Have civilians assemble in the Chantry."

The soldier looked around to make sure that he was the one being addressed, then snapped to attention. "Yes, ser!" He saluted. "You're wearing the mantle, ser."

"What?" Cullen remembered the bear hide monstrosity draped around his shoulders. "Oh yes. I think it may have saved my life today…Jim, was it?"

"Yes, ser."

The man stood grinning foolishly, until Cullen barked at him, "Go!"

"Yes, ser!" With a fumbled salute, he scampered off.

"We can help."

Caro and, inexplicably, Luc Gault appeared at his side, escorted by Charter.

"What in the Maker's name is he doing here?" Cullen demanded.

Charter shrugged, immune to his displeasure. "We need all the help we can get."

"I'm a healer." Luc saw his incredulous expression. "Believe me, I'm aware of the irony."

"We have a healer."

"Actually," Charter broke in, "he's more of a herbalist."

He bit back a curse. "Don't you want to stay with your sister?"

"I'm coming too." The diminutive mage's jaw was set in determination.

"I suppose you're a healer too, are you?"

"No." She dug into a pocket and produced a handkerchief; her fist closed, and when it opened there was only a handful of cinders left behind. "I can fight."

"I can't allow this."

"Cullen," Cassandra interrupted. "You haven't seen what's out there. We could use a healer in the field, I am sure of it. One who can patch up wounds in a hurry. And the demons will have magic on their side - perhaps we should too."
"How do we know they won't run off?"

"Where to?" Luc spread his hands. "We made it this far travelling in a crowd. The roads all around are covered in bandits, wolves, now demons, and there are two wars on between here and home. Wherever that is. Do you think we'd get far?"

Cullen felt himself losing the battle. "What experience do you have with fighting?" he demanded of Caro.

She began to count on her fingers. "Bandits, wolves…"

"Demons?"

"I've been harrowed. That gives me more experience at fighting demons than most of your soldiers, I'll bet."

Exasperated, Cullen looked to Charter. "And the other one? Does he want to fight too?"

"No, Commander. He said he'll stay in a cell where it's safe and we can all go to the Void."

"Those were his exact words?"

The elf smirked. "There were some other words."

"Well, that's pretty clear." He glanced sharply at Caro. "Remember, you're the only one who can testify against him. If you disappear, he's free."

She crossed her arms. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Very well then." Cullen addressed the assembled crowd. "It's best that anyone who can't handle a weapon stay here for now. We should expect casualties." He located the herbalist. "You - what's your name?"

"Adan."

"Can you deal with the wounded?"

"We'll find out, won't we?"

"Get volunteers. Take anything you need."

Roderick piped up. "You can't just -"

"Anything." Cullen gripped his sword pommel. "Soldiers, with me. Keep your wits about you."

Luc never saw the demon that killed him. Cullen estimated he'd healed more than a dozen people; some were able to go on fighting while others, like the woman with burns over half her body from a rage demon, would survive the journey to the Chantry for further healing.

It was mid-morning when the Breach - so someone named the ugly wound in the sky above the
mountain, and the name had stuck - had opened, and an arduous few hours fighting their way up towards the summit. Though it was hard to estimate time beneath the swirling greenish clouds, Cullen put it at a few bells past noon. The ash had settled but the demons had not, each one killed replaced by another within minutes. The only predictable factor was that they appeared near what Cassandra had dubbed the rifts.

"Can you do anything to close that?" he had asked Caro, and she had looked at him with wide-eyed incredulity.

"Can you?"

"It was worth a try," he'd muttered.

Now they had retreated some distance from a rift. A soldier had taken a gut wound from a shade and while demons kept spewing from the rift, it was necessary to abandon the fight. Luc was crouched over the woman; to Cullen's practiced eye he looked all but drained of mana. If only he was carrying a lyrium potion…

"Reinforcements on the way, ser."

Luc stood, staggering a little. "That's the best I can do for now. If we can get her to safety, she's got a -"

There was no more warning than a sudden disturbance of the ground, as if the snow was boiling green. Soldiers were suddenly knocked flying and a monstrosity unfolded from amidst the chaos, all elongated limbs and teeth, and claws that lashed out and rent the mage's back. He fell, eyes staring sightlessly.

Caro let out a wordless cry of horror. She spun her staff and unleashed a gout of flame on the creature. It shrieked and flailed, advancing on her even as its body burned. Cullen charged to her defence even as his gut told him it was hopeless: he would never reach the thing before it sent the girl after her brother.

It raised a spindly arm, screaming in fury as fire continued to stream from the mage's fingers. Just as it drew back to strike there was a whistle and a sickening crunch; the demon's cry was cut short and it collapsed to the ground like a bundle of sticks, its grotesque corpse already beginning to dissolve. In a moment all that was left was the burning shaft of an arrow.

"Leliana!" Cassandra cried in relief as the reinforcements approached. The Divine's Left Hand was at their head, a fresh arrow already nocked to her bow.

Caro fell to the ground, scrabbling on hands and knees to her brother's side. A dreadful sound came from her throat; it was as if she was keening and at the same time unable to draw breath, so all that emerged was a single hoarse note, over and over. Her little fingers clutched desperately at his robes.

Powerless in the face of such raw grief, his soldiers fidgeted. One hawked and spat loudly on the demon's remains. "When we find who did this…" he said menacingly.

Cullen checked on the soldier, still prone in the snow. "She's unhurt." He hailed Leliana as she joined them. "Have you got a litter?"

"We can make one quick enough." The speaker was the bearded Ostwick templar - Millward, Cullen vaguely remembered.
"If you're here, who's watching your Knight-Captain?"

"He's here too." Millward nodded to his left, and the old man raised his visor. "Now before you say anything: he may not remember his own name some days, and he can't tell an apostate from a… whatever we're calling them now. But he knows demons and he can swing a sword better than your green recruits. He's proved his usefulness."

Cullen glanced at Leliana. "It's true," she confirmed. "We would have struggled to get this far without him."

"We'll need an escort," Cullen said, "or at least someone to stay with the wounded and," he faltered, "Healer Gault here, until it's safe to take them back to Haven. Do you think you could do that?"

Millward shook his head sorrowfully at the bloodstained snow. "Ugly business, this." He shifted uncomfortably. "Thing is, serah, Bennick and the other boys went off this morning, up there. By rights I should have gone with them. And if we can, well, we'd like to see it through. I couldn't look their families in the eye without knowing."

A small group of recruits had gathered together, and one spoke up. "We can go, Commander," he said. "We've got a pretty fair idea where the rifts are now and we should be able to skirt 'em."

"Very well." Cullen knelt by Caro, now sitting silent and dry-eyed. "You should go with them. You've not got enough magic left in you to face another rift."

"We were free," she said. "We could have gone to Redcliffe. We could have gone anywhere." Her hands were twisted in her robes, scrunching and smoothing the fabric over and over. Cautiously, Cullen reached out and took her hand, and she looked at him vacantly. "It's all my fault," she whispered. "We just found each other and I threw it all away. It's all my fault."

"He saved lives today." Not like the templar, Cullen thought, cowering in his cell while the world above burned. "You both did."

"Will he go to the Maker's side, do you think?"

"Yes," said Cullen. "I believe so."

Her dark head bowed. "Then I don't think I will see him again."

"Cullen!" Cassandra called. "Dark will fall in a few hours. We must hurry!"

"I'm sorry," he said, letting her hand fall. Whether she heard him or not he couldn't say.

The landscape changed as they climbed, ruined walls poking up like jagged black teeth and the path increasingly strewn with scorched masonry. Looking down they could see the mountainside blighted by dozens of lurid green rifts.

"How many demons are in the Fade, exactly?" a soldier wondered aloud. "Will they run out eventually?"

The snow underfoot gave way to blackened rubble, and Cullen did his best not to think about the steady crunch, crunch beneath his boots as he walked. It was in vain: not long after they spied their first half-shattered skull, grinning blackly amidst the rocks.

The area around the temple had been levelled by the blast and there lay more horrors. Faceless,
featureless corpses littered the landscape, each one twisted in an attitude of agony. However quickly these people had died it wasn't quick enough. More than one recruit had to turn aside, retching noisily.

"Commander!" Nearer what was left of the Temple entrance, a scout flagged his attention. The man raced over, wide-eyed and breathless.

"Have you been inside?" Cullen demanded.

"We daren't go in yet, Commander. It just doesn't feel right. But you'll want to see this."

"What is it?"

The scout gestured them to follow. "There's a girl, Commander. She...well, she fell out of the Fade."

"A girl?" he asked sharply. "Not a demon?"

"Doesn't look like any demon I've seen, ser, and I've seen a few today." He led them to a small group of scouts, surrounding a body covered in someone's cloak.

"Alive?"

"Yes, ser, barely. There was a woman behind her."

"It was Andraste," a scout said, and some his fellows muttered in agreement.

"Well I can't say if it was Andraste, ser," the first scout said. "Never met the woman. But it was bloody odd. Anyway, see for yourself." He tugged back a corner of the cloak.

Behind him, he heard a sharp intake of breath from Leliana.

Fell out of the Fade, they said. Was it possible? Could a soul return from across the Veil?

But this wasn't just a soul. She was real, chestnut hair in a braid over her shoulder the way she used to wear it so long ago. Covered in ash just like in his nightmare and for a moment he felt she might crumble into dust.

She cried out, clutching her left arm to her chest.

"There's something wrong with her hand, ser. This has been happening since we found her."

Eyes the grey-blue of an ocean storm flickered open, filled with pain.

"Help me," she whispered. Her eyes drifted shut again and her arm fell limp at her side.

Cullen wanted to run to her, to take her in his arms and tell her he was so, so sorry. He wanted to turn away, flee down the mountainside and across Ferelden, wade into the ocean and disappear.

Instead he stood, frozen in indecision and terror.

"You."

It was the first word he'd heard from Knight-Captain Dalkeith since the templars had joined them. He sheathed his sword, gently but firmly pushing through the assembled soldiers. Cullen made as if to stop him, but Leliana put a hand on his arm before he could take a step. Wait, she mouthed.
The grizzled templar knelt by the unconscious girl's side, removing a gauntlet to lift the hair away from her face, and just like that the spell on Cullen was broken. The resemblance was striking but whoever this girl was, she wasn't Solona Amell. The dead remained dead.

"You're a long way from home, girl," Dalkeith muttered.

"You know this woman?" demanded Cassandra.

"Makers b- ahem, breath, so it is." Millward joined his Knight-Captain, shaking his head in disbelief. "We've known her since she was a child!"

"A mage?"

"She's a mage alright." He pointed at her, his grin equal parts exasperated and relieved. "That's Juliet Trevelyan."
It had been a week since Tanner's abrupt departure, and Juliet still felt ill when she thought about the way things had ended. She chafed to be away in Crestwood, where Hawke was doubtless already waiting for them.

But the Inquisition had become a large organisation, and large organisations seldom moved quickly. While Hawke could travel alone and in relative anonymity, Juliet's expeditions must be scouted, provisioned and planned to the smallest detail. So instead she was stuck here in Skyhold, surrounded by a thousand small reminders of her indiscretion.

She sat at a table in the hall poring over a pile of documents that never seemed to get smaller: requisitions, reports, requests for the Inquisition's help from all over Southern Thedas. Scout Harding was already on the way to Crestwood, but she had left Juliet a map and pages covered in her small, neat handwriting: the location of the village and fort, a brief history of the place and its flooding during the blight, even a few credible rift sightings. A potential logging site? That would help in rebuilding -

"Inquisitor?" The messenger gave a quick salute and handed her a roll of paper. "Plans for the mage tower, milady."

The mage tower. She waited until the man was gone before letting out a groan, burying her head in her hands.

"Pining for your soldier, Freckles?"

Juliet spun in her chair to glare at Varric.

"Firstly," she said, "I'm not bloody pining . Secondly, can we pretend just for a minute that I have some kind of private life?"

The dwarf threw up his hands. "Sorry, Inquisitor," he said, hopping up into the seat next to her. "You're one of the most important figures in Thedas right now. Definitely the most important in Skyhold. Your inner circle has at least three spies, and a mind-reading spirit boy." He patted her on the back. "Keeping secrets is hard."

She stared at him a moment longer, her lips pursed. "Thirdly -"”

"I'll change your names."

"Do not -"

"And titles."
"Put this -"

"And location."

"In a book," she finished. "Or I'll throw you to Cassandra."

"Oh, come on Freckles! It's got everything: deception, mistaken identity, star-crossed lovers…"

"I think you're reading a little more into it than actually happened."

"Of course I am. I'm a writer."

Conceding defeat, Juliet looked back to the documents spread out in front of her; the lines on the vellum seemed to blur and dance, Harding's meticulous text reduced to gibberish. She blinked hard, twice, but her eyes refused to cooperate.

"Why not take a break?" Varric asked and added, too casually, "Take a walk in the garden."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why the garden, Varric?"

"Why so suspicious, Freckles?" He grinned, hazel eyes glinting with mischief. "It's a beautiful day. The fresh air will do you good. See how your herbs are growing!"

"I need to plan this…" she protested weakly.

"Do you trust yourself to make good plans right now?"

"Fine." She bundled up the documents, shoving them unceremoniously into a nugskin folder. "I'll go to the garden." In response to Varric's waggling eyebrows, she snapped, "but only because I've got no bloody place better to be."

With a smirk he propped his feet up on the table. "Enjoy the scenery, Inquisitor."

"Thin ice, Tethras," she shot back over her shoulder.

It was close to midday, and she had to admit that the sunlight on her face and the smell of freshly-turned soil did much to clear her head. The air was fragrant with blooming herbs, all of which somehow seemed to thrive here despite the varying climates from which they had been plucked. She wished she could put down roots so easily.

Male laughter caught her attention; the voice was familiar, if not the sound. Beneath the gazebo a small table and two chairs were set up. Dorian faced the Commander over a chess board, hexagonal in the Northern style. The two men were too engrossed in the game to notice her approach and she took a moment to appreciate Cullen's relaxed posture, his easy demeanour as he rolled his eyes in response to Dorian's gentle ribbing.

"Why do I even…" He finally saw her and broke off mid-sentence, half rising out of his chair. "Inquisitor."

Dorian flashed a charming smile in her direction before turning his attention back to Cullen. "Leaving, are you?" The mage's voice, much like his skin, was smooth as honey. "Does this mean I win?"

It was jarring to see the Commander so comfortable in the presence of Dorian, of all people. Despite his wit and charm, or perhaps because of it, he didn't always rub people the right way. Plus he was a Tevinter, and an unapologetic mage. Was there some other reason than magic, then, for
Wary of spoiling the mood, she motioned Cullen to sit and tried to match Dorian's light tone. "Are you two playing nice?"

"I'm always nice," Dorian lied without skipping a beat. He put his tower down with a decisive thunk and crossed his arms; impressively muscled for a mage, Juliet could never help but notice. If he'd been differently inclined, she was sure she could have put those muscles to good use. "You need to come to terms with my inevitable victory," he declared to Cullen. "You'll feel much better."

"Really?" Cullen pounced, shifting his tower from a black square to a white. "Because I just won," he said with a low chuckle, "and I feel fine."

Dorian raised one perfect eyebrow and smiled, impeccably gracious in defeat. "Don't get smug." He rose from his chair with the fluidity of a cat. "There will be no living with you."

Juliet shifted to let him pass and as she did so, his silken voice reached her in a pitch too low for Cullen to catch.

"He's all yours, Inquisitor," he purred. "You lucky thing."

She felt her ears burn crimson, unfortunately catching Cullen's eye at the same time. Embarrassment painted a foolish smile across her face and the Commander looked at her with some confusion.

"I should return to my duties as well…" he said, adding hesitantly, "unless you would care for a game?"

Me? she nearly said. Did everyone else in Thedas die and nobody told me? Then she remembered the hand that had lingered on hers a moment too long after he helped her onto her horse, and a heat swept through her that had nothing at all to do with embarrassment.

She maintained her composure enough to give him a tight smile. "Prepare the board, Commander."

Oblivious to the fire that raged inside the woman opposite him, Cullen was conversational as he laid out the carved pieces. "As a child, I played this with my sister. She would get this stuck-up grin whenever she won, which was all the time." He glanced up at her, a rarely seen flash of mischief in his eyes. "My brother and I practiced together for weeks…the look on her face the day I finally won…"

Juliet caught a glimpse of the boy he had been in his smirk, before a little frown marred his features.

"Between serving the templars and the inquisition, I haven't seen them in years," he said regretfully. "I wonder if she still plays."

It was easy to forget that Templars, too, could become separated from their families. She doubted Michael had ever recounted such fond memories of her. But she felt a pang when she thought of Lavinia, and of Alec, whose child must have been born by now.

"You have siblings?"

He seemed surprised by her enthusiasm. "Two sisters, and a brother."

"We're the same!" Juliet paused. "I mean, my family. Two boys, and two girls." She shifted,
nudging Cullen's foot beneath the table. It went unacknowledged by both of them as they adjusted their postures, but she was aware now of his proximity; she could swear she felt the heat of his knee close to her own.

"Really?" Leaning forward on his elbows, he graced her with a warm smile. "Michael I know, but…"

Juliet couldn't suppress an eye roll at the mention of her Templar brother. "Alec is the eldest. He's…well, he's unlike Michael. And Lavinia is between Michael and I in age. Terribly frivolous and always has her foot in her mouth, but she means well." Unexpected tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of them; on waking in Haven to the news that she'd been publicly disowned, she hadn't dared to contact them. "Tell me about yours," she said with forced cheerfulness.

"Mia," he replied with a smile, "is the one I told you of. Branson is my brother, and the youngest is Rosalie."

She wished suddenly, fiercely, that she might some day meet them. "Where are they now?"

"They moved to South Reach after the Blight…" A flash of pain reached Cullen's amber eyes. "I do not write to them as often as I should." Staring at the board, his gaze seemed to come back into focus. "Ah, it's my turn."

"Alright," she said with a grin, "let's see what you've got."

He paused, looking at her for the longest time before shaking his head. Leaning in to make his move, he said softly, "You always seem as if you're laughing at a joke nobody else understands."

"I thought everybody understood," she said lightly. "I'm the joke."

"No." His stare, however glancing, pierced her to the core. "You are far from a joke. You're the reason we are all here."

"And who am I?" she countered. "Someone else would have led. Hawke, if Cassandra could have found her."

"Hawke." His wry smile made a mockery of the idea.

"Nobody should take themselves too seriously." Pondering a moment, she moved a pawn into the path of his mage. "The more power you have, the less seriously you should take yourself."

Cullen's gaze raked her. Surely, she thought, he must sense the shifting restlessness his mere proximity woke in her. Finally he shook his head. "Are you sure that doesn't do a disservice to those who choose to follow you?"

"The opposite." She countered his move. "Power without humility lead to tyranny."

For a moment he looked startled. Then he laughed, shaking his head. "Of all people, I should know that."

"So you and Dorian…" she began tentatively.

"Dorian and I…?" Cullen's eyebrows shot up. "I assure you, there's nothing of that sort -"

"Oh no, I just meant…you seemed to be getting along so well! It's not a friendship I would have expected."
"I ran into him in the library. Varric asked me to find a book for him." At her quizzical look, he chuckled. "I think he's trying to avoid Cassandra."

"I can't say I've ever seen Cassandra in the library."

"No point in taking chances, were his words. Anyway, Dorian…" Considering his next move, he twirled a stone piece in his fingers. Such long, clever fingers…he caught her eyes suddenly and she shut her mouth with a painfully audible snap. "He just seems lost, you know. He's a long way from home."

"Don't let him think you pity him," Juliet advised. "He won't thank you for it."

"It's not pity," he said, surprised. "Sympathy, yes, but I do enjoy his company." He caught her look of puzzlement. "Is that so unusual?"

"Only," she floundered, searching about for the right words, "because of, you know, what he is."

"What he is?" Cullen's voice held faint disapproval. "I'm not sure I take your meaning."

Oh, Maker, now she'd offended him. "Only that I thought it might make you feel uncomfortable. Threatened, even."

"Threatened?" Cullen sat back in his chair, arms folded as he studied her face. "Why should I feel threatened?"

Could we build a lesser amulet? she thought desperately. One that would take me back to before this line of conversation began. "You wouldn't be the only one. I know several people are concerned with his presence…" Biting her lip, she trailed off as Cullen drummed his fingers on the chair arm with evident annoyance.

"I know that some people harbour foolish prejudices," he began, "but I certainly didn't think you would be amongst them, Inquisitor."

"Me?" she answered indignantly. "Why in Thedas would I be prejudiced against Dorian? I'm the same as he is!"

Cullen gaped. "You are?"

She couldn't understand his reaction; this was by no means new information for the Commander. "Well, yes. I mean I'm not from Tevinter, but essentially…"

They realised their mistake at the same time. Juliet groaned, covering her face; Cullen rubbed the back of his neck as he grinned sheepishly. "You meant…"

"Yes. And you thought…"

"I did." His grin slipped. "But you're wrong to think Dorian's magic should make me uncomfortable. I mean, you're a mage and I'm not uncomfortable with you."

"You're not?"

She must have sounded a touch too incredulous, because Cullen looked at her sharply. Then he smiled, staring down at his hands. "I don't know if you've noticed, Inquisitor, but I can be somewhat…awkward…at times."

"No," she answered, laughing. "Really? It had completely escaped my notice."
"If I seem that way around you, please know that it's not because of the fact that you're a mage. It's because, well…"

Juliet's mouth went dry. "Yes?"

"It's just the way I am," he finished quickly.

Hope gave way to sharp disappointment. Surprised by the intensity of her reaction, she hid her feelings in contemplating the next move. "Your turn," she said finally. His pawn joined the small crowd of pieces on the tabletop.

He studied the board, frowning. "You're no stranger to this game."

"My mentor in the Circle, Lydia," she swallowed hard at the memory, "didn't believe in idle hands. Or minds. When the study of magic didn't take up our time she had us learn history, geography, strategy, mathematics…" An opening became apparent and she swiftly dispatched one of his mages. "Chess."

At the mention of her Circle, Cullen's expression became shuttered. "It seems that was time well spent," he said stiffly. "I wish…" He shook his head, apparently clearing some stray thought. "Your move, Inquisitor."

Always Inquisitor. What was it about him - or about her - that drove her to keep needling him? He was too proper, too authoritative. It made her keep trying to crack open that facade of stiff professionalism, even if she felt like a bird hopelessly battering its wings against a window pane. It made her blurt out, even as her rational mind told her it was a terrible idea, "So…tell me about you and Hawke."

Cullen's smile vanished. "How do you…? Never mind," he said, somewhat curtly. "I would rather not." With exaggerated carefulness he finished his move, putting his knight down with the barest tap of stone on stone. Without meeting her eyes, he elaborated, "It was a mistake."

"Oh." A mistake. Her chest suddenly tight, she attempted what she hoped was a smile. "You have regrets?"

Cullen's answering smile was more of a grimace. "I regret the entire thing. Now, really…I'd prefer if we moved on."

"I'm sorry," she said with a lightness she didn't feel. "It seems my sister's not the only one capable of putting her foot in it." She saw the opportunity to take his queen, and considered letting it pass; then, with an apologetic smile and a half-shrug, she toppled the piece with her mage.


Juliet laughed. "I wasn't aiming for stuck-up, but I suppose I've earned the right to gloat a little."

"It's not over yet," he countered. Thoughtful, he glanced at her through sandy eyelashes. "This may be the longest we've gone without discussing the Inquisition - or related matters. To be honest, I appreciate the distraction."

"I aim to please." Impulsively, she added, "We should spend more time together."

Another misstep in a conversation littered with them. Wasn't Cullen supposed to be the awkward one? But there was no awkwardness in his heavy-lidded gaze. "I would… like that," he said, and his low voice sent a pleasant shiver through her body. She could only smile back inanely, until he
shook himself and turned his attention back to the board.  

"We should…finish our game," he stammered. "Right. My turn?"

They sat in companionable silence. Stone tapped against stone, and the low hum of insects and murmured conversations played around them. Finally Cullen played the only move that was open to him, and it was checkmate. He smiled wryly.

"I believe this one is yours. Well played." He leaned back, rolling his shoulders in a way that distracted Juliet entirely from her victory. "We shall have to try again some time." Standing, he offered her a small bow. "Inquisitor."

"Juliet," she said. "Please."

"Juliet." It was only her imagination, adding that low, husky timbre to his voice, the flash in his molten gold eyes. It was just her name; there was no reason for it to feel like a caress. And yet long after he had taken his leave she sat, fingers playing around her lips as if the memory of a kiss lingered there.

"Still here?" Dorian startled her from her reverie. He ensconced himself in the chair opposite, fingers steepled and a knowing gleam in his eye. "Do I sense a romance blooming? I would so love to attend a provincial wedding."

"Did you and Varric orchestrate this?" she demanded.

"Varric?" he said, affronted. "Perish the thought, dear cousin. Our Commander wandered into my library and I took pity on him. He seemed so…” The mage twirled his hand theatricality. "Lost."

"How terribly kind of you to keep him entertained."

"Obviously, darling Juliet, I resent the implication to my very core." Dorian plucked an imaginary piece of lint from his trouser leg, examining it between thumb and forefinger. "But I did rather enjoy the game…and the view."

"You don't find our little garden too provincial?"

"Now, now," he chastised her. "We both know I wasn't talking about the garden. My question remains: are you two delightful creatures going to give all of us, your proud and loving family, the news we wait so impatiently to hear? Or must Varric's prize pool grow ever larger?"

"Bloody Varric," she muttered.

"Well?" Dorian crossed an elegant ankle over his leg.

"I'm going to have to disappoint you."

"Oh." Dorian did, indeed, sound disappointed. "Tell cousin Dorian absolutely everything."

Juliet sighed. I regret the entire thing. Somewhere in the Hinterlands, Tanner would be thinking the same about her. "There's really nothing to tell." She turned her hand palm up; the Anchor pulsed faintly green. "I just don't want to be anyone else's mistake."
On a damp night in Crestwood, Varric made a noise of protest as Alice Hawke shook her head like a dog.

"Hawke! I just got dry!"

She flashed him a grin, feral and unapologetic. "This should warm you up." She tossed the dwarf a leather flagon. "Can you believe they've abandoned the inn?"

Varric took a deep, appreciative sniff. "Antivan sip-sip? I can't believe the bandits didn't find this first."

"They did." She sat down next to the Inquisitor, stretching her long legs toward the fire. "I requisitioned it."

"Oof." Varric handed the drink to Juliet, who took a cautious swig.

"Shit," she sputtered. "That's…"

"Mean?"

"I'd say that's accurate." Her throat burned, but the warmth blossoming in her veins was a welcome antidote against the wild weather. "Blackwall?" she called. The Warden had spurned the canvas shelter by the fire, preferring to stare out into the darkness. Some way distant the sickly light of a rift cast the rain with a green tinge.

"I'll pass," came the truculent response. He hunched further inside his cloak. Juliet pondered going to talk to him; it seemed news of the Wardens' folly had hit him hard. But perhaps for now it was kindest to leave him alone with his thoughts.

"Warden Stroud isn't joining us?" she asked Hawke. The older woman waved a hand, busy taking a large swig of sip-sip.

"No," she said finally. "Busy maintaining his moustache. It can take hours."

"Hawke, if you were any more of a liar, you'd be…" Varric scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, you'd be me."


"You've had worse."

"That's what she said."

"What does that even mean, Hawke?"

She giggled, wiping her mouth. "It means I'm sadly rusty at drinking." Juliet found the flagon waved in her face. "Which means you both have to help me practice."

The second swallow went down easier. "We have to storm a bandit fortress tomorrow," she protested weakly.

"Excellent," Hawke proclaimed. "Get enough of this into you and you can kill them with your breath." She glanced around the camp. "Where's your other mage? The bald one?"
"Gone to bed, I think." Solas had, if anything, reacted worse than Blackwall.

"Chuckles the second isn't much for a party," Varric explained. "Unless it's a Fade party."

Alyse scrunched her nose delicately. "His experience of the Fade must be very different to mine."

Varric accepted the drink from Juliet with a smirk. "For the love of the Maker, don't ask him about it."

"Why not?"

"He'll tell you."

"Ohhh." Hawke shot her a sly wink. "A storyteller. Is there anything worse?"

Varric wobbled to his feet. "Alright, Chuckles, you got me." He pulled up his hood and splashed off in the direction of a rocky outcrop. "I'll be back!"

"The dwarven bladder strikes again," Hawke said, watching him go with a fond smile. She turned her sea-green eyes to Juliet, giving her a friendly nudge with her knee. "So Varric tells me you and our boy Cullen are driving each other mad with sexual frustration."

"I'll kill him," Juliet muttered.

"It's true then?" Hawke's laugh was a rich, musical thing. "Why not take the plunge?" Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Anders more than holds his own in bed, but Cullen…" She exhaled slowly. "That man gives head like he was born to it."


"He has some baggage, certainly. But who doesn't?"

"He said…" She faltered, not wanting to offend, but the liquor had loosened her tongue enough for the words to tumble out. "He said the two of you were a mistake."

Hawke's feelings didn't seem hurt; if anything she was amused. "Poor thing, he probably still flatters himself that he took advantage of me." A languid smile spread across her face. "I assure you it was very much the other way around. I had a need, and he…" She arched a brow suggestively, "Filled it."

"Blessed Andraste." Juliet's cheeks flamed. Thankfully the sound of rain drumming on canvas masked their conversation from Blackwall and the handful of scouts milling about. Maker knew she'd had enough of being the subject of gossip. Yet another reason not to pursue the Commander. "It doesn't matter," she told Hawke. "He and I would be a terrible idea."

"Fucking mages," Hawke said with feeling.

"Pardon me?"

"You." She pointed. "Fucking, Mages. Let me guess." Warming to her theme, she shuffled around to face Juliet. "You spent years in the Circle avoiding any sort of attachment, for fear you'd have it taken away."

"That's not strictly -"

"I'm not talking about sex, Inquisitor. Attachment. Relationships. Feelings." Liquor splashed as she
waved her arm. "And since you've been free you push away anything that seems like it might be real. Because you're still terrified of losing, and deep down, deep down…" A gloved finger prodded Juliet in the chest. "You think you don't deserve it. You're Anders."

"I'm not."

"You are, though."

"Better looking." Varric had silently rejoined them and Hawke scowled at him.

"I dispute that."

"Less prone to grandiose acts of violence."

The Champion chose to ignore him.

"Do you know how hard I had to throw myself at that man? Any time things seemed like they were getting too easy, he lost interest. He's so convinced he doesn't deserve happiness that he was incapable of letting himself love me unless he hated me too. It took me years to wear him down. I had to defend the Templars. I had to side with Merrill."

"Or," Varric observed as he oiled his crossbow, "you could have paid attention to the many red flags…"

"I paid attention."

"Yeah, like a bull pays attention."

"You can talk," Hawke said with a significant look at Bianca.

"That's…" Varric glanced uncomfortably at Juliet. "Not your story to tell."

Hawke let out a snort to rival a druffalo. "Coming from you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"Shut up, then."

They reminded her of close-knit family, Juliet thought, in the way they could move without pause or ill-feeling from joking, to bickering, to the sort of fond, exasperated look they now gave each other. "You weren't the only one who didn't see it coming, Hawke," Varric said quietly. "We were all close to Blondie. Not as close as you, but still."

Hawke's smile was equal parts gratitude and resignation. "I was close enough," she said. "Close enough he might have trusted me if I hadn't been so busy pushing his buttons."

"Relationships are complicated, Chuckles."

"I'll drink to that." And she did, her pale throat bobbing until Juliet began to wonder how she didn't run out of breath. Finally she wiped her mouth and tossed the flask to Varric. "Anders bears scars from Kinloch as well, you know," she told Juliet.

Kinloch? It made sense, she supposed. Anders had come from Ferelden, the same as Hawke. And Cullen. "He was there when it fell?"

"No." Hawke had picked up a damp twig from the ground; she broke pieces off and threw them
into the fire, watching them hiss and burn. "He was gone before then."

"So the scars…"

"Weren't left by demons." Her mouth twisted in the bitter parody of a smile. "Rage of the human variety, I'm afraid. Templars, to be specific."

"Are you saying that Cullen…?"

"Anders says not. Even if he was the sort to want to, he's too much of a stickler for the rules. My point is…" She scrubbed a weary hand across her face. "What the fuck is my point? Oh yes." Once more she pinned Juliet with her intense gaze. "There were reasons for what Anders did. I respect those reasons, if not the choice he made. And when he blew a Chantry-sized hole in the middle of Hightown I, the Champion of Kirkwall, let him live. Protected him, even. Why? Because even though we drive each other mad, even though if the rest of the world weren't busy trying to kill us we'd probably murder each other, I love the crazy, damaged bastard. And he, for some reason, loves me."

Even Varric had nothing to say to that. The three of them passed the flagon between them. Blackwall had, at some point, retired to bed and the rain showed no sign of abating.

"Anyway," Hawke said finally. "If we can make it work, you and bloody Cullen…just get on with it, before the world ends." She hid her face from Varric with a gloved hand. *Head,* she mouthed. *Trust me on this.*

The party finally dispersed. Alone at last in her tent she pictured Cullen's heavy-lidded amber eyes, that lopsided smirk as he stared up from between her spread thighs, the sure, steady sweep of his tongue…She silently blessed Andraste for the drumming rain as she gasped into her pillow.

Just get on with it, Hawke said, as if it was that easy. Then she pictured Cullen's face again, this time wearing Tanner's hurt, confused expression. The repercussions, should things go wrong. She'd never really had a friend: now she could count a handful, could she really afford to lose one?

*If he wants you,* she thought, *he'll let you know.* And if he didn't? Well, she was a Circle mage. She'd long been used to the idea of being alone.

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"I wish you'd let me know."

Cullen's brow was damp with sweat; he groaned as he hunched over his desk.

"I wanted to," he rasped. "So many times, I wanted to. I just…"

"I know," she said, gripping his shoulders tightly. "I know."

"Juliet," he gasped.

"Hold on, Cullen," she said. "Hold on."

It had been a fortnight since his revelation, and she could have kicked herself for not seeing it earlier. The mood swings, the way that even in the relative warmth of Skyhold he draped himself in that ridiculous bear hide mantle? The fact that, *oh wait,* he'd been a Templar for years and now he
wasn't? Every single sign had pointed to lyrium withdrawal, and, like a fool, she'd missed them all. She smoothed the damp curls back from his face. "Are you sure you can manage Halamshiral?"

Cullen grimaced. "As much as I would like to miss it…I cannot neglect my duties. You need my soldiers, and they need a Commander."

Juliet smiled fondly. "Can I respectfully suggest that part of leadership is choosing someone to take over your duties when necessary? None of us can afford to be indispensable."

"Oh really?" Through the pain, he managed a short bark of laughter. "That must be why we have so many Inquisitors waiting in the wings."

"Hey," she reprimanded. "If I could put this mark on just anyone, I'd be halfway to Antiva by now." She frowned. "Which is to say…you are indispensable, Cullen. To me, at least. But you should allow yourself a night off every once in a while."

The worst had passed: he straightened, allowing her to dab at his face with a dampened cloth. "I will." He took the cloth from her hands with a grateful smile, wiping down the back of his collar. "But not this night. After all, they've already taken our measurements. It would be a shame to miss what they've designed for you to wear, wouldn't it?"

"It's a long time since I've been to a ball," she said wistfully. "It might be nice to get to dress up for once."

"Well," he said in that low, soft voice that never failed to flood her with warmth - it must be deliberate, mustn't it? "I wouldn't miss that for the world."

Red was a sensible choice, she supposed. And a dress would have been entirely impractical for the evening that transpired. But after an evening spent fighting Venatori and demons and Maker knew what else, tripping over the bodies of innocents as she tried to save an Empress who was far from innocent…it had to be said that red did fuck all to hide bloodstains.

"Well done, Inquisitor!" Josephine gushed. "I must admit that I was skeptical of your ability to play the Game, but your performance tonight has been masterful." She hesitated. "Of course, after this you must return to the ball -"

"What?" Behind the bath screen, Juliet froze with her tunic half off. "You can't be serious, Josie. I'm exhausted, my uniform is ruined…"

"Never mind that, Inquisitor -"

"For the last time, call me Juliet!"

"You have won so much influence tonight," the ambassador chirped. "Your work is just beginning!"

"I can't influence anyone covered in gore!"

"Never mind that!" Josie said breezily. "Enjoy your bath and then we'll talk about the second half of the evening."
"The second…? Josie. Josie!"

If the ambassador was still in the room, she chose not to respond. Juliet sank gratefully into the steaming water; the restorative power of a bath could not be denied. Perhaps now that the worst of the night was over, she could finally allow herself a drink or three - Maker knew she'd earned it.

When she stepped out of the tub a garment was hanging over the screen; she wasn't sure how she hadn't noticed its arrival. Silk and gossamer, the shade of wine - now there was a colour to hide blood, even if the gown itself would be useless in combat. It slipped over her body like water, hugging her torso and flaring at the hips; when she moved, the skirts swished and swirled prettily around her legs. Suddenly she wished fiercely for her sister: Lavinia would die, she thought, to see her in this dress.

Josie was a tolerable substitute: when Juliet finally emerged she bounced and clapped, nudging Leliana at her side. "We had your measurements," she said, beaming. "It seemed a shame not to put them to good use."

"Are you alright?" Juliet asked the spymaster. She was used to Leliana seeming businesslike, even somewhat grim; perhaps it was only in contrast to Josephine's joy, but just now her expression was almost sad.

"I apologise, Inquisitor." Leliana's smile was tight, as if the effort hurt her face. "For a moment - " She hesitated. "You reminded me of someone. She loved to hear of dresses, dances, romance. I was going to show her Orlais…" A world-weary bitterness crept into her voice. "Perhaps it was just as well she never had her illusions shattered. The Game would not have treated her kindly."

"Leliana -"

"It's fine, Josie." At once the Nightingale's mask fell back in place. "I'll be in the same place as before if you need me. I would wish you good luck, Inquisitor, but I hardly think you need it."

With a bow, she took her leave.

The excitement in Josie's face had somewhat dimmed; she watched after her old friend with concern.

"What happened to her?" Juliet asked. "The girl Leliana knew?"

"I never met her," Josephine said, "but she died a hero." She smiled sadly at Juliet, the picture of elegance in her dress the colour of blood.

The last few hours were interminable - between dances it was all small talk, double talk, talk talk talk. Juliet almost wished for someone to kill. The dying minutes found her on the balcony with Celene's enchanter; despite Leliana's dire warnings, after the fawning of Orlesian nobles she found the mage's sharp company almost refreshing.

Still, it was a relief when she finally bade her goodbye. Juliet ached for solitude, for a moment's respite from being Inquisitor, and her heart sank when she heard heavy footsteps on the tiles. Who now? She turned, a polite rejection ready on her lips.

"Cullen!" Relief made her sound far too eager. She took in his pale face - the lyrium? This didn't seem like the symptoms she'd come to recognise. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

He glanced back over his shoulder. "In a manner of speaking." Two more strides brought him to
her; he stopped within an arm's reach and she was pleased to catch his admiring glance over her figure, even as he flushed and fixed his eyes on her face. "Never mind that: how are you?"

"Exhausted," she admitted.

"I'm not surprised." He joined her in leaning against the balustrade, looking out at the lightening horizon. "If foiling an assassination didn't wear you out, all that dancing must have."

"And none of it with you."

"I warned you," he said, "I'm not much of a dancer."

"If you can fight like I've seen you do," she teased, "you can dance."

He gave a soft huff of laughter. "Oh, but it's easier with an enemy, than…"

"I could step on your toes," she offered. "If it helps with the enmity." She saw his lip curl slowly upward. "Well, Commander?"

"I agreed to call you by your name," he said, turning his head to meet her eyes. "The least you can do is call me Cullen."

"I call you Cullen all the time," she pointed out reasonably, "and I haven't heard you use my name once this evening."

"Juliet." It felt like a punch in the stomach, if such a thing could be infinitely pleasurable. He bowed stiffly, stretching out a hand to her. "May I have this dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask." She took his hand and moved in closer; he placed the other tentatively on her waist.

"I thought the same." His breath tickled her ear. "Luckily at least one of us knows what she wants." Maker, but she was tired. And he felt so warm, so safe…without thinking, she let her head fall to his chest. He stiffened: then, just as she was poised to flee in mortification he relaxed, his fingers threading through hers with an easy familiarity. Relief flooded her.

"This is how rumours start, you know," she murmured.

Cullen chuckled. Juliet felt the vibration of his laugh against her cheek and felt a pang of longing for something simpler, less fraught with the complications of title and propriety; a dynamic unencumbered by their roles past and present. She looked up to see him smiling, an easy warmth in his amber eyes.

"If it saves me from the sharks in there," he said, "I'll start one myself."

"You think you've had a hard night?" she teased. "Duke Gaspard just had an entire conversation with the tops of my breasts."

Cullen cleared his throat, and for a moment she worried she'd gone too far. "Well," he said hesitantly, "I'm sure they more than held their own."

Juliet stared at him for a long second before bursting into laughter. Cullen looked both pleased and relieved, and for the first time in far too long she felt giddily, unconcernedly happy. She laid her head back on his shoulder and his hand dropped to the small of her back, touching her as though it were the most natural thing in the world.
Pale dawn crept across the sky, and they danced.
"I've been meaning to give you something." Alistair had waited until they were alone before speaking, but Solona had noticed him for a while now shifting from foot to foot on Eamon's rich carpet, thumbing a cloth-wrapped parcel. "It's nothing big. It's nothing, really."

"You've been meaning to give me nothing?" she teased gently.

Alistair didn't smile. "Well, no. I've been meaning to give you something incredible. Something that shows you... but all I could find was this."

He handed her the parcel, meeting her questioning gaze for a second before glancing away. He cleared his throat.

"You're making me nervous, Alistair." It was oblong and solid, not heavy but not light.

"It won't explode," he said. "I'm almost certain it won't. I mean, I got it from The Wonders of Thedas but they assured me it's just an ordinary... well." He gestured. "Open it."

The cloth fell away. Beneath was a book bound in emerald-coloured leather, embossed with twining embrium flowers.

"A book!" She turned it in her hands, seeking a title. "What is it?"

"Open it," he said, biting his thumb.

"It's empty." She flipped through page after page of clean, blank vellum. "Is it supposed to be? You said it's not enchanted."

"It's supposed to be," he confirmed. "I know you like stories but I couldn't find one I knew you'd like." Uncertainty made him speak too fast, his voice rising in pitch the longer she stayed silent. "Besides, I've seen you read - anything I bought you wouldn't last a day. So I thought you could write down your own story. Or anything, really. Anything you want. But it's stupid, I'll take it back and get you a pendant, or -"

"Alistair." Uncaring of the servants' curious looks, she stretched to throw her arms around his neck. "I love it, truly. Thank you."

"You do?" He grinned, lifting her off her feet and spinning her in a half circle. Then, remembering himself, he placed her gently back down. "It's a Warden thing," he explained to an elven woman scrubbing the floor.
"Didn't ask, ser."

"Ser?" he said. "Berta, you knew me when I was sleeping in the kennels."

Her sideways glance at Solona hinted that his choice of company hadn't improved much. "Very good. Ser."

"Come on." Determined to hang on to her happiness, Solona tugged at his hand. "Let's see where we're sleeping."

"I haven't been here in years," he said, craning his neck as they walked. "They've changed the dining room!"

He looked down questioningly as Solona dropped his hand. "Eamon's rooms," she said by way of explanation.

"Solona -"

"This way, I think." She clutched the book to her chest, trailing her fingers along the stone wall. "They put me in with…"

Alistair stopped dead in the doorway. "Morrigan."

The apostate turned from the fireplace, her face the picture of disdain. "It seems we are sharing a room," she said to Solona. "Why, 'tis like having the sister I never wanted."

"I'm excited too, Morrigan." She sat down on one of the beds, swinging her legs. "We can plait each other's hair, talk about dresses and boys…"

Despite herself, Morrigan let her mouth twitch up a fraction. "You have me confused with Leliana, I think."

"She won't be spending much time in here anyway," Alistair told her. "So you can feel free to spend your nights sacrificing kittens, or whatever it is you do."

"Spare me the details." Morrigan turned back to the flames, her good will evaporating.

"I won't?"

"Well, no…" Wearing a suggestive smile, he pulled Solona up off the bed. "I know of a much better room." With her hand clutched firmly in his he strode out the door, making her nearly skip in order to keep up. "It's smaller, and there's only one bed. You'll still have to share, I'm afraid." Reaching their destination, he pulled her inside and shut the door. "With me."

He pressed against her, his lips hot on her neck, and for a moment she melted.

"Alistair," she protested at last, pushing him away. "What will your uncle say?"

"Does he need to know?"

"This is his house. Of course he'll know."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "Why should it matter?" he asked. "You know he didn't care what I got up to when I was a child."

"You're not a child now." She gulped. "You're in line to the throne. It matters where you spend
your nights, and who you spend them with."

Alistair pulled back, fists clenched at his sides. "You know I don't care about that -"

"You should!" she cried. "You have a claim. You've seen what I've seen. Change things. Or what are we even fighting for?"

"We're fighting the darkspawn," he argued. "We're fighting Loghain -"

"Why? So his daughter can take over the throne? You know she's been running things in all but name."

He frowned, looking away from her. "You know what? I don't want to talk about this right now. Why don't we go see what Eamon wanted."

"I want to stay with you, Alistair. I want it more than anything." Solona reached out her hand. "I just…"

"I know." Alistair's shoulders slumped. "Let's just…we'll do this, and we'll talk about it later." He took her hand, gently squeezing her fingers between his.

"I love you," she said hopefully.

"And I love you. More than any of these narrow-minded -" He drew in a deep breath. "I love you." Tears stung her eyes. "I want things to be simple between us. More than anything."

"They will be," he promised. "Give it time."

The knot in her chest tightened.

Time, for now, brought further complications. Howe dead, Anora rescued, their capture and escape. Now here she was again outside Eamon's door as a terse argument went on inside. She tried not to eavesdrop, but words drifted through the door and dropped like stones in her consciousness: foolish, stubborn, lineage, marriage, unthinkable. Alistair's replies were too low to make out, but for once he didn't seem to be the one doing most of the talking.

"Twould seem you survived, then."

"For now." She shuffled over to make room on the bench. After looking at the vacant seat in faint surprise, Morrigan sat down awkwardly beside her.

"Twas kind of you to stay elsewhere for the night," she said, adjusting the drape of her top. "You did not need to go to such lengths, however."

"I'll be ready to joke about Fort Drakon one day," Solona answered with a shiver. "This isn't it. Besides, I hear you have a new room mate now."

"Ah, yes." Morrigan examined her long nails, perhaps envisioning raking them across a certain royal face. "That one seems oddly reluctant to braid my hair and chat about dresses."
"I can only imagine your disappointment."

"Indeed." The two women sat in silence, until Morrigan spoke up again. "'Tis a curiosity to me, the causes for which you risk your life. Do you wish this woman to be queen?"

"No, but -"

"Yet you led your friends on a suicide mission to rescue her."

"It wasn't suicide. We're alive. And I couldn't just leave her."

"Would you have been so charitable, I wonder, had you known she would become your rival?"

"Rival?" Solona laughed. "I hardly think I'm going to be queen."

"Yet a king must have a queen," Morrigan insisted. "If not you, then who?"

"I don't know." She concentrated on breathing, ignoring the tightness in her chest.

"Would it not be simpler then, if he were to marry his brother's widow?"

"No," she said vehemently. "I won't let him be forced into a marriage without love, without friendship, without even respect..." She trailed off, burying her face in her hands. "He might as well marry you."

"A terrible thought indeed." Morrigan crossed her arms. "But must Alistair be king...?"

"Yes," she insisted. "He must. Nobody has a better claim to the throne. Nothing will change, if things continue as they have been. He has to be king."

She hadn't noticed the door swing open; Alistair and Eamon regarded her with expressions of guarded surprise.

"It seems your colleague, at least, agrees with me," the Arl said.

Alistair bit his tongue, looking for all the world as if he'd swallowed something unpleasant.

"I would speak with you next, Warden."

"She has a name," Alistair muttered.

"Warden is fine." Solona stood up, failing to hide a wince.

"You should see Wynne first," he argued, but she placed a quieting hand on his arm.

"You should see Wynne. I'll go to her when I'm done here."

"And then come and find me."

"I will."

Eamon noticed the familiar gesture, and she saw his eyes harden. "After you," he said stiffly, holding the door. "Warden."

It was a mercifully brief, if uncomfortable, talk. Wynne was able to heal a fractured rib and clean
up some grazes that risked becoming infected; the dungeon floor had been none too clean. So it was that by the time she slipped into Alistair's room, it no longer pained her to move.

"I was so afraid for you." He pulled her gently down onto the bed, running a careful thumb along her jaw.

"It's just Eamon."

"I don't mean Eamon. I mean back there, at Fort Drakon." His brow knit in concern. "I was afraid of what they'd do to you."

"To me? I'm no one. You're the threat."

"No one?" Alistair's lip twitched. "I don't think anyone but you believes that. And if they knew what hurting you would do to me…" All trace of a smile disappeared from his face.

"Are you saying I'm a liability?" she said, half-jokingly.

"You're the only thing that keeps me going." He pressed his lips tenderly to hers. "Without you…"

"Eamon wants me to convince you to marry Anora," she said in a rush.

Alistair drew back, understandably confused by the dizzying change in subject. "And are you going to?" he said warily. "Convince me?"

"Do you think I could? Even if I wanted to - and of course I don't - you're a grown man capable of making his own decisions."

He smiled with a hint of bitterness. "Yet when I say I don't want to be king…"

"Nobody can make that choice for you."

He rolled into his back, letting out an almighty sigh. "In the dungeon, when I thought of what they might do to you…" The heels of his hands ground at his eyes, as if they could dispel the visions from his imagination. "I was ready to give up the throne. I would have renounced all claim in a second, if it would keep you safe. And that's when I realised…" Fists balled, he stared up at the bed canopy. "I don't want to give up the throne. I don't entirely want to be king, either, but when I think of the alternatives…"

"Alistair." She turned his face back to her. "Don't marry Anora. She'd make you miserable."

He reached out and pulled her close against him. "Marriage to Anora is the last thing on my mind, I assure you." His lips sought hers once more, his hands beginning to wander over her body.

"Alistair," she gasped as his thigh slid between hers. "Eamon sent me here to tell you to marry another woman. Isn't it a slap in his face to…here? And with Anora under the same roof?"

"Let's slap him in the face, then." Alistair rolled her on top of him, his fingers working at her buckles and his hips gently rocking up against her straddled thighs, and she soon found Eamon and Anora were the least important concern in the world.
"So, the bastard has his whore fight his battles for him."

Beneath his sneer, Loghain looked tired. Dark pouches ringed his eyes, and since Ostagar his long face seemed to have gathered excess skin. It seemed the power he'd craved sat heavily upon him.

Solona put a warning hand on Alistair's shoulder. "He's just trying to intimidate us," she said in an undertone. "Don't let it work."

Alistair had been more than willing to take him on, but in the end he had been overruled by of all people, Solona and Eamon.

"This is about the Blight," she had told him. "About the Wardens. If you fight him, it will seem like just a grab for the throne."

She was unsure if Eamon agreed with her logic; perhaps he just saw an opportunity to rid himself of the nuisance mage. Either way, he concurred.

"The waters are muddied enough as it is," he said. "Let Loghain answer for his crimes, then we shall settle the question of the throne."

They faced each other now, Loghain's pale eyes glinting in amusement at the spectacle of the young girl in drakeskin leathers, holding a sword in place of a staff. "Not even a shield?" he taunted. "I don't suppose you could lift it."

He wasn't far off track: Zevran had decided early in her training that a shield would be too cumbersome. Her small stature should be an asset against larger opponents, and to that end he had her learn to wield a dagger, to move in fast and sharp against the slower swings of a warrior's sword. Today, fittingly, that dagger was Duncan's.

"I must confess I'm surprised you got by Ser Cauthrien." Loghain examined the edge of his blade; it gleamed wickedly in the light from the high windows. "Does she live?"

"She saw reason," Alistair informed him, and Solona saw a flicker of anger over the teyrn's drawn features.

"How disappointing," he drawled. "But no matter. There will be time to deal with her once I'm finished with you."

"Don't let him land a hit," Alistair hissed in her ear. "Drakeskin may be tough, but it won't turn a longsword."

"Don't get hit," she confirmed. "Sound advice."

"He was a rogue before he was a warrior. He can move faster than you'd expect."

"I'll be fine," she reassured him. "Stop fiddling with my bracer. I promise it's tight enough."

"Surprisingly honourable," Loghain went on, "to use a sword. I thought you would be relying on magic tricks. Then again…" He smiled unpleasingly. "You mages have no honour, do you? You're nothing but a shell waiting for a demon to fill it."

"I have this, Alistair." She could sense the young man almost humming with rage. "Stand back now."

He looked ready to embrace her, hands twitching uselessly at his sides. "For the Grey Wardens,"
he murmured, and she nodded.

"For Duncan."

Alistair stepped back into the circle surrounding them, and now only Solona and Loghain remained.

"Yield now," he said in a menacing undertone, "and I'll allow you both a quick death. Otherwise, the soldiers at Fort Drakon have some unfinished business with you." His eyes flickered down and up. "Particularly the men."

Solona fixed him with a grave stare. "Teyrn Loghain," she said quietly. "I learned about you as a child. You saw your mother raped and killed when you were a boy." Loghain hid his flinch of surprise well, but not well enough. "You grew to be a hero. To many people you still are." She paused, allowing her words to settle. "This sort of talk is unworthy of you."

A grudging respect flickered behind his eyes. "Perhaps you are right, mage." He stopped short of a bow, choosing instead to raise his fist to his chest in a brief salute. A murmur of surprise rippled around the onlookers. "Shall we fight?"

It's the only thing left to do, she thought, returning the salute. The runes on Duncan's dagger glowed and swirled; in her other hand, Spellweaver sang silently to her. She fell into a fighting stance, as natural to her now as casting or breathing.

For Duncan. For Alistair. For the Grey Wardens.

Loghain raised his sword.

For Ferelden.

Solona let the hot water soak away her aches. Her body still held the memory of the shield blow that had sent her sprawling; she remembered the terrifying moment of paralysis as Loghain advanced on her, her limbs recovering just in time to scramble clear as metal rang against the stone floor.

Then came the blow she had somehow parried with her own sword - it wasn't until the adrenaline of battle had settled that she realised her arm was fractured. The ever-reliable Wynne had healed it, but when she raised her arm just so -

"Solona?"

She bit back her cry. "Alistair?"

"Are you alright?" the voice came from behind the screen.

"A little sore still," she confessed. "Why don't you come in?"

There was a shuffle, a cleared throat. "No, that's…I'll wait."

A cold shard of suspicion pierced her belly. "It's nothing you haven't seen before," she said, aiming for a light tone and coming out with a croak. "Really, I don't care."
"I do."

She sat up, splashing water onto the tiles. "What's this about, Alistair?"

"I need to talk to you." A pause. "When you're dressed. I'll wait."

Suddenly it seemed as if the copper tub were filled with ice, gently steaming in the warm room. Solona nearly stumbled climbing out, and in a haze she pulled on the gown the servants had provided, entirely forgetting to towel herself dry.

"Just a moment," she called out. Somehow it seemed important to drag a comb through her hair, as if looking presentable might ward off the coming disaster.

"Take your time." Alistair's voice was dull with misery, and she felt tears gather. Stop, she told herself. It could be nothing.

She had already begun braiding her hair when she rounded the screen, the familiar activity helping to soothe her nerves. It would never dry this way, a part of her mind scolded her. I don't care, she told it. I don't care about anything.

Alistair took in the sight of her in the robe and gulped, averting his eyes. "I didn't mean to bother you," he said. "It looks like you merit your own room now, at least."

"I'm moving up in the world," she said with forced cheer. "Or, more likely, Eamon is trying to keep me out of your room."

"Yes," he answered robotically. He leaned back on the dressing table and crossed his arms, and she felt the distance between them stretch.

"You're treating me like a stranger." Solona perched on the edge of the bed, knotting the final damp ropes of her hair in place. "Why?"

"That's not..." He was dressed simply, in a linen shirt and trousers. "It's been a strange day," he said, running his fingers through his short hair. "I killed a man."

"I remember." The arc of the sword, the spray of blood across Anora's delicate face. Loghain's severed head and the thud as it hit the floor. "It wasn't the first time."

"Outside of battle, though." His handsome face was troubled: was this the only reason for his strangeness? "I'd thought about it for so long, but to actually do it..."

"I could have -"

"No," he said with a hint of annoyance. "There are some things I need to do for myself."

"Is that why you're angry?" she asked. "I might have been wrong, but the reasons -"

"I'm not angry," he snapped, then scrubbed his hand across his face. "I'm not," he said more gently. "I was afraid you would die. And I couldn't bear -"

"I didn't. It's not the first time you've seen me face death, Alistair, we're Wardens." Yet she had been as surprised as anyone, when her freeze spell had lasted long enough to thrust her dagger between the plates under Loghain's arm, leaving it dangling and useless. After that, the outcome of the duel had been all but decided.

"None of this is the point." Alistair moved to sit an arm's length away from her on the mattress.
"The point is that I'm king now. And as king, I'll be expected to produce an heir."

Solona fidgeted with the end of her plait, unable to meet his eyes for fear he would see how close she was to broken. "Is that even possible?" she asked. "You told me Wardens can't have children."

"I don't think so." Alistair's shoulders slumped. "But I have to try. I have to be seen to try. And to do that…I'll have to marry."

It all made sense. But why was he putting distance between them…? Her mind filled in the blanks.

"I'm in the way."

"That's not -" He groaned. "I can't hide you. It's not fair, if I marry someone. Not on her, or on you."

There it was, then. Solona felt her world tilt. Suddenly nauseated, she pulled her feet up onto the bed and crawled to the pillow, folding in on herself. Her arms wrapped tightly around her middle: she was afraid the contents of her body might spill out if she didn't hold them in place, leaving only a cracked-open shell.

She understood. Of course she did. Somewhere deep inside of her, the litany repeated itself: **not for you, not for you.**

"I didn't mean to break it to you like this," she heard Alistair say as if from a long distance. "I just thought…if I left it too long, it would be too hard."

Somehow she found her voice. "It's not too hard now?" She sounded oddly calm. It was a blessing, with the hysteria that threatened to overcome her. "I suppose you did fool me, all this time. I really should have known better."

"Don't," he pleaded. "It's hard enough…you can't think I want this."

"Then don't do it." A treacherous waver had crept into her voice. "I'm sorry. Perhaps I should have more pride. I could tell you I understand, and it's for the best. I wish I could pretend it doesn't feel like you've run a sword through me, but I can't."

There was a moment of silence, then the bed creaked as Alistair laid his body alongside hers. "Please," he said hoarsely. "If I could make it work…I won't let them take you back to the Circle. You don't have to be afraid of that."

"It doesn't matter." A part of her had always known that one day the universe would realise its mistake and take everything back. None of this happiness had been meant for her. But foolishly, she had allowed herself to believe she had more time. "I'm tired," she whispered. "Was that everything you wanted to say?"

"Solona." He reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers. "I love you. None of it was a lie."

She drew in a shuddering breath. Why offer her hope, after all he'd just said? He couldn't know how cruel it was.

And yet she was drowning, and here was a lifeline she couldn't help but grasp. She squeezed his hand, words she knew she shouldn't speak tumbling from her mouth.

"We still have the Blight, if we even survive it. Then you'll be here in the capital and I'll be with
the Wardens, who knows where? Why change anything now? Why can't we wait, and decide then?"

He hesitated, and her resolve hardened. She pressed her lips to his knuckles. "Don't worry about the future: you'll be king," she said, hating herself. "You can do anything you want, can't you?"

Alistair hesitated. She guided his hand inside the loose front of her robe, slipping her own fingers clear to let his close over her breast. "Solona," he groaned, but he didn't pull away. He loved the feel of her beneath his palms; he'd told her so often enough.

Pressing her advantage, she arched gently into his touch. "I don't want to be queen," she said with a sigh, "I just want you. I don't care what they say about me."

"You taught me I could stand up for myself," he murmured in her ear. "What's the point in being king if I can't bend the rules a little?"

You'll break his heart. She felt it to be certain. One way or another she would be torn from him and yet she was too greedy to let him go just yet. Would his pain be much worse if the end came later? Had she spared her own feelings at his cost? But any guilt she felt was swamped by relief, by the sheer need his closeness kindled in her.

"I'm sorry," Alistair whispered, his touch becoming less tentative as he rolled her nipple to stiffness. "I thought I could do this without hurting you. I didn't think you could care as much as I do. You're so...And I'm just..." He sighed in frustration. "I need to tell you how fierce you looked today, facing down Loghain. How graceful." Quick fingertips skimmed down her ribcage. "It reminded me of the first time I kissed you. You were practising with your sword in the moonlight, but it was more like you were dancing." His touch made the skin of her belly jump and shiver. "And then I thought of the second time I kissed you."

"The second time?" His fingers dipped lower, and she remembered a tent in Ostagar, the brush of stubble against her thigh before..."Oh."

Alistair tilted her face towards his and kissed her deeply, his hands making short work of her robe. "Did you forget, love?" he whispered as he shuffled down the bed, strong hands pinning her thighs to the mattress. "Let me remind you."

It wasn't until much later, sated but still troubled, that she fell into an uneasy sleep. She saw herself curled up on top of the covers, Alistair's body wrapping around her like armour.

"It hurts." The spirit she had come to regard as a friend settled down beside her. "The more you are together, the more it hurts. But being together less hurts more."

"I won't pretend it makes sense," she told him, for she had begun to think of the shifting lights as him. "I should have let him cut ties. Pretended he was nothing to me."

The lights dimmed and brightened as the spirit shifted curiously. "Would pretending help?"

"Probably not." An ancient pain stirred inside her. "He was going to give me up."

"Because you are a mage?" the spirit asked. "Deadly, dangerous, demons swirling around you."

"We can't have what other people have," she said. "Even if I weren't a Warden, it wouldn't be allowed."
"Do you wish you weren't a mage?"

"Yes," she answered. "With all my heart. It would be easier to be nothing."

The spirit pulsed gently. "Everyone gives you up."

"In the end? Yes."

"I want to show you something."

The Fade shimmered around them. A house came into being: opulent furnishings, tall windows letting in the sun. Solona caught the Fade's echo of humid heat, relieved only slightly by the hint of a sea breeze.

The chatter of children surrounded the bed. On it, a raven-haired woman cradled an infant; beside her, a man with a neatly trimmed beard looked dotingly upon both of them. A beam of sunshine fell in the baby's eyes, and she scrunched up her tiny face.

"They named you for the sun," the spirit said.

"That's me?" Solona looked in amazement at the tiny fists, the smacking of the rosebud lips. "I always thought…"

For as long as she could remember, those around her had known she was a mage. She had accepted it as fact long before her power even manifested. She'd pictured herself unwanted, cast aside at birth by parents who suspected her curse. Or perhaps even born inside a Circle, the secret shame of some apprentice girl.

"Did they give me up?" she asked hoarsely, and the spirit flared bright.

"Never," he said.

Solona came awake, Alistair breathing slowly and evenly beside her. Only then did she recognise the implications of the spirit had shown her.

"Did they give me up?"

"Never."

Yet she had ended up in a Circle.

So they fought, and they lost. Did the Templars step over their corpses to get to you? Was any of it worth the cost?

She watched Alistair breathing, felt the warmth of his body next to hers, and the weight in her chest grew heavier.

See? her mind whispered. Someone will pay, sooner or later. This is what happens when people fight for you.
The Breach festered in the sky above them, baleful and unquiet.

Could it sense their intent somehow? Cullen wondered. Solas would scoff at the idea, he knew, or at least smile politely which amounted to the same thing.

The apostate was ahead of him in the column, deep in conversation with the Herald. Behind them trailed the mages, the handful who had been with the Inquisition from the beginning greatly bolstered by the recent arrivals from Redcliffe. Today they spared no resentful glances for the Templars who flanked them; today the Inquisition's forces, from the Left and Right Hands of the former Divine to the lowliest mage apprentice, moved with purpose.

The Herald of Andraste did not take the head of the column; that wasn't her style. She conferred with the scouts. She checked on the progress of the line, chatting with the people she recognised and becoming acquainted with those she didn't. She moved amongst her inner circle. Her energy was boundless, and leadership fit her like a second skin.

Unfortunately so did her dragonling hide leggings, and Cullen was ideally placed to appreciate their tailoring as she took the stairs ahead of him. She turned back to catch something Solas said and caught his eye, flashing him an irreverent grin. Cullen hoped the mountain air could excuse his flushed face.

It was up here on the mountain he'd first met her properly. Word had reached him via the scouts that the mystery prisoner was awake. It had played on his mind all morning, while they battled the unending tide of demons spewing from the rifts.

Lady Trevelyan, he imagined himself saying with a small bow. Well, not a bow, more of a respectful inclination of the head. Enchanter Trevelyan? How did one address a mage who had been escorted from the Fade by Andraste herself? Was she a holy prophet or a terrorist? Opinions seemed divided either way. Perhaps she wouldn't even join the fight; she'd be chained and sent to Denerim or Val Royeaux. Perhaps it was only her resemblance to a girl long dead, but he wanted to believe.

Just don't say anything stupid. Then she'd appeared in the midst of a battle, green energy surging from her palm, and healed a rift as if it had never been. He'd at last been introduced to her, and those grey-blue eyes had met his. Charm, grace, even manners had deserted him.

I hope they're right about you. We've lost a lot of people getting you here.

Her eyes widened in surprise and he cursed himself inwardly. Then, of all things, she smiled.

You're not the only one hoping that.

He was lost.

Once, as a boy with unruly curls and country manners desperate to join the Templars, his mother had stressed to him the importance of first impressions. Now he wasn't sure which had stuck. Did she see him as a humourless authoritarian, or a bumbling fool? From the way she needled him it was difficult to tell.
Juliet. One should not admire a divine prophet's figure as she leaned over the war table, or become mesmerised by her lips when she spoke. Or seemingly have the image of her face burned into the back of his eyelids, assessing him with those laughing blue eyes.

Solas made an aside to the Herald and she glanced back again, smiling. In his haste to look away, Cullen stumbled on a rock.

"Are you unwell, Cullen?" Cassandra asked; she had a way of making even concern sound like an interrogation.

"Quite well, thank you," he lied. Today, of all days, he could not allow weakness to get the better of him. The persistent ache in the back of his skull was bearable as long as he had something else to focus on, and sealing the Breach provided an excellent distraction.

Cassandra was not called a Seeker of Truth for nothing: the set of her jaw told him that he would answer to her eventually. And why not? Of all those at the top of the Inquisition, she was best placed to understand his plight. What's more, he had come to count her as a friend.

"Do you anticipate much trouble?" he asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"In closing the Breach? I think not. I have watched the Herald close many of these rifts in the past months. The Breach is nothing but a larger version of the same. With the power of the mages behind her, it should pose no difficulty." She looked at him sharply. "You were disappointed with her decision to recruit the mages. Are you still?"

"Ask me when we're done here." The thought of hundreds of rebel mages descending on Haven had given him no shortage of sleepless nights, but they had integrated more or less seamlessly into the Inquisition. "You shared the same misgivings, didn't you?"

"In the beginning I did. But I trust Juliet's - the Herald's - judgement. They are better off under her leadership than - " She stopped herself with a shake of her head; enough choice words had been said about Fiona's ill-conceived actions. "I would rather they were on our side than fighting for the Venatori."

He couldn't disagree, although it rankled not to know what was happening with his former brethren at Therinfal Redoubt. "You admire her," he said with a nod at Juliet. Their tumultuous beginning had given way to a grudging respect, and seemed to deepen the longer the women spent in each other's company.

"I do." Cassandra smiled slyly. "I have noticed you…admiring her, also."

His neck began to itch - really, this mantle could be too warm at times. "Yes, well. There's much to admire."

She glanced uphill. "It is interesting what a change of perspective can do."

He was spared having to come up with an answer. "Cassandra!" the Herald called down. With an agility that never failed to surprise him she skipped down the slope to meet them. "How are people getting on down there?"

"One mage has sprained her ankle," Cassandra reported. "She insists on continuing, however. The Iron Bull has offered to carry her the rest of the way. Otherwise, we are proceeding well."

"Wasn't there a healer close by?" Juliet asked with a small frown.
"The mage, ah, seemed quite happy with the arrangement. As did Bull."

"Oh, I see." She winked at Cullen. "Normally Bull's conquests don't have a limp until the next day."

He smothered a grin. "Ahem. Quite."

"And how are you two doing? I'm in awe of all you people climbing up a mountain in full plate. I'd struggle to stand upright wearing all that metal."

"You are no weakling, Lady Trevelyan. I don't think I've seen you so much as break a sweat on this climb."

"Please, Cullen, you know I'm not Lady anything." She rolled her eyes. "If you want to address me, a simple Herald of Andraste will suffice. Anyway, roaming up and down every inch of the Hinterlands seems to have done wonders for my physique. Much better than lounging around eating bonbons in the Circle."

"I doubt very much you did either of those things."

"That's true, I suppose," she conceded with a sniff. "Only because of the terrible lack of bonbons. That's your true cause of the mage rebellion, right there." Looking between Cassandra and Cullen's blank expressions, she pulled a face of mock contrition. "Wrong crowd for that joke, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Cassandra agreed.

"Moving on, then!" Juliet sprinted back up to join Solas. The elf climbed with as little effort as the Herald, seemingly strolling up the rocky slope with his hands clasped behind his back. The two of them were soon once more absorbed in conversation.

"She is incorrigible." Cassandra's expression was stern but she could not hide the fond note in her voice.

"Yes," Cullen agreed with a crooked smile. "She certainly is."

Celebrations had begun in earnest before even half of the expedition had returned from the peak. Ale flowed freely, and musicians of varying talent had banded together in an effort to get people dancing; it seemed to have worked.

"Should we debrief?" Cullen asked. "It might be a good time to talk about our strategy going forward -"

"Or - and hear me out, now - it might be a good time for a well-deserved drink, and to join our people in celebrating." Juliet's smile was weary. Sealing the Breach had taken more from her than she cared to admit. She was right: the Herald, at least, had earned the evening off.

He saw her wistful look at the dancing and his soul ached, knowing as well as he did that she wouldn't be welcomed in that riotous festivity. The Inquisition followers loved and respected her. It wasn't always a fine line between respect and fear, but throw worship into the mix…religious or
not, nobody down there would be linking arms and spinning in circles with the Herald of Andraste.

An invitation was on the tip of his tongue. Then, "Come on, Freckles," Varric said. "Let's find you a place to sit and a qunari-sized tankard."

She wasn't friendless, at least, even if she had to work ten times harder to get people to relax in her presence. Luckily she was blessed with more social graces than Cullen.

He found himself at a loose end before too long; an empty tankard at his elbow, and a vantage point from which to watch the party. He should get more ale, should mingle with the Herald's inner circle - not the crowds down below, because how many were mages? How many had come from Kirkwall, or had heard tales of Kirkwall?

It wasn't always a fine line between fear and respect.

"Commander Cullen?" came a tentative voice. He turned, at first mistaking the speaker for an elf. She was short and near-painfully thin, dark eyes too large in a pale face.

"Caroline?" he ventured.

"Caroline," she corrected gently, somehow making his own pronunciation seem like an armful of dropped pottery. "Orlesian, remember? Anyway, Caro will do."

"I'm sorry, it took me a moment to recognise you without your robes."

The corner of her mouth twisted. "It's hard to recognise myself most mornings," she confessed, tugging at a leather bracer. "I'd been in robes so long...those robes a little too long." Her nose wrinkled delicately. "But it looks like I'm a scout now, so I get to dress the part."

"A scout?" he said in surprise. "Really?"

"It's a new world." She looked up at the scarred night sky, awe and trepidation warring on her features. "For now. Perhaps a mage can be more than one thing. Even the Hero fought with a sword."

All these years and he still had trouble picturing Solona wielding anything more deadly than a book, or a handful of crushed weeds. "I didn't mean to imply...magic could only help, I imagine, in the work of a scout. It suits you."

"See? A Templar admitting that magic is helpful," she teased gently. "It really is a new world."

In a new world these sorts of conversations wouldn't feel like he was walking on top of a frozen lake at spring thaw; each too-heavy step causing the ice to creak and groan beneath his feet. "Magic has always had its uses..."

"In serving man, yes." Caro leaned on the wall next to him. "It was certainly useful today."

"Were you there? I didn't see you."

"Of course; I am still a mage. But as a scout, I shall take it as a compliment that you did not see me." A shiver rattled her small frame. "It's all I ever wanted, really, to be unseen."

Difficult in a Circle; it did not need to be said. "I'm sorry," he offered, and she turned a curious gaze on him.

"What for?"
"All of it. I'm still learning...how to make amends. How not to be the monster that mages fear."

"You've never given me reason to fear."

"Not you. Hundreds like you."

She shook her head. "We all have our sins. Spend your time making amends, not agonising about why you needed to make them in the first place."

"You speak like someone with a multitude of sins."

"I came here to kill a man," she reminded him. "And instead I lost my brother."

"You had your reasons."

"So did you. Reasons only get us so far. We convince ourselves that the end justifies the means, and when the end isn't what we'd hoped for all we have left is our reasons. They don't help you sleep at night."

"It's hard to predict that someone will start a war." Against all logic he felt compelled to defend himself, and she dismissed him as easily as he deserved.

"Is it? No one person can start a war. Reasons upon reasons upon reasons. You played your role."

Cullen laughed bitterly. "If you were aiming to soothe my conscience, you've missed the mark."

"That wasn't my aim," she said solemnly. "We're all damned. The Maker turned his back on us, and He wasn't wrong to do so."

"You could be right." They watched the revelry in silence. A thousand excuses formed on his lips; none were adequate.

"Cullen?" She had to stand on her toes to reach him; it was over so fast he could almost believe he imagined it. The kiss was little more than the brush of moth wings across his lips: a light, hopeful thing.

It was, he realised, a question as much as anything. Yet his stunned silence forced her to put it into words.

"You have a tent, no?" she asked with a tremulous smile. "Time is in short supply. I don't want to die, having only known... I want to know life."

Cullen's heart broke for her, and for the needless cruelty of the Circles that had robbed the joy from so many young lives. And he, he had been their instrument. "Why me?"

Her dark eyes seemed to drink in the torchlight. They mapped his face, flickering over scars and creases, blue shadows and day-old stubble. "You seem like you would be gentle."

For a mad moment the idea was not without its appeal. He could take her to his tent, carefully undress her, kiss her lips and stroke her dark hair, show her all the tenderness she'd been denied. It had been so long, and he craved touch like lyrium...

Yet she was so young. And what could he offer her? A broken Templar, an awkward fumble on his narrow cot, another woman's name on his lips - Juliet's or Solona's, he hardly knew which. That wasn't the life she was seeking. That wasn't what either of them deserved.
"We sealed the Breach," he told her with a forced smile. "There's no cause to think we might die any time soon."

"No, then?" She stepped back, a flicker of pain crossing her pale face. "I understand."

"You don't." He swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. "You'll find someone nearer your own age -"

"You're not that old."

"Someone who cares for you, who can give you all of himself. Not just a night."

"I can't have both?"

"I can't offer you either."

Again she searched his face, and this time she found something to take the jagged edges away from her smile. "It's true what they say, then. You're in love with her."

"In love?" he repeated, flustered. "Who says that? I mean, with who?"

"Cullen, you silly man." Caro laid her little hand on his cheek. "You know who."

She melted into the shadows then, a true scout. He was left with a lingering shame, and the memory of moth wings brushing his lips.

Then the bells rang.

The last time he'd seen Raleigh Samson was in Kirkwall. Efforts to heal both the city and the Order were underway, and most days it felt like they were pushing sand uphill. It came as a surprise to Cullen the fervour with which his former bunkmate threw himself at the task; if Cullen could be called disaffected with the Templar Order, Samson was downright hostile towards the whole establishment.

He was not without his reasons.

It was said that Meredith had made an example of Samson, and perhaps that was true. But when he'd been caught smuggling letters for an apprentice mage - harmless letters, when Cullen picked through the dirt-stained pages, lonely and bittersweet and filled with youthful regret for a romance cut short - Samson's punishment was secondary.

In hindsight, Cullen suspected that was why she singled the boy out. The Gallows was not a place to make friends, and some lines could not be seen to be crossed. Even later he came to think it had been a test on Meredith's part: trying the limits of her power and finding there were none, she had started a pattern of small escalations. And Cullen, the proverbial frog in the pot, hadn't seen the
A useful boy, Maddox, dead-eyed and hollow-voiced and clever with his hands, always making things.

Samson was evicted from the Order on Meredith's command, and Cullen learned to despise the man he became: a sneaking, desperate creature, the butt of jokes amongst the recruits who had never known the gnawing, hollowed-out feeling that lyrium left in its absence. It was finally Hawke, of all people, who convinced him to bring Samson back into the fold. She had the power of shame over him after all, and she wielded it like daggers.

In the bleached-bones white of the Gallows, Samson had worked tirelessly to clean up Meredith's mess. Perhaps he hoped her legacy might be cleared away with the endless wagons of rubble and broken copper statuary. No such luck, but he had drawn people to him: a grim-jawed crew of discontented Templars, unswervingly loyal.

Cullen had wondered at that time what would happen once the physical scars of the city were healed. When Samson found his hands idle and people still flocking to his leadership, where would he turn next?

He wondered no longer.

The things Cullen would forget almost immediately:

What was said, in those rushed moments outside Haven's gates. What possessed him to send the Herald, their most precious asset, on such a generic task as securing the trebuchets. Who had even warned them in the first place, whose pale finger had pointed to the thing atop the mountain pass and beside it, Samson. How he had known, unerringly, over distance too far for human sight, whose red-rimmed eyes it were that locked with his own.

What anyone had said to him as he paced the Chantry floor in impotent fear, waiting for Juliet to return. The words he had spoken to her as he sent her back out to die.

The things that would fade over time:

The scent of fear and desperation permeating the Chantry, livestock for slaughter packed in too tightly. The precise cadence of his voice when he entreated everyone to stay strong, to trust in their Herald. The shifting dark restlessness of Leliana and the too-bright, shiny cheer of Josephine.

And the moments that would remain grafted onto his consciousness, like the blossom of foul ichor on Kinloch's walls:

The fervour in Samson's eyes, somehow wild and cold all at once - but had his imagination supplied that detail? He must have been close to a mile away - and the utter certainty that he would not stop short of their entire destruction.

Her crooked smile before she left on her suicide mission.

The hope. It glowed, and burned, and rekindled however many times he ground it beneath his heel.

Her fur-wrapped body cradled against his chest, chilled beyond shivering, and how when they reached shelter they had to pry her from his arms. He meant to put her down, he did, but however
he mumbled and apologised he couldn't quite seem to relinquish his grip.

Those were the things that would stay.

Caro found him by the healers' tent; again she moved silent as a cat, and it wasn't until her softly-spoken, "I heard you were looking for me?" that he became aware of her presence.

"Thank the Maker," he muttered, fighting the urge to envelop her in a bear hug that would likely snap her like a twig. She seemed unhurt, save the smudges of blue beneath her eyes. "I was afraid you didn't make it. After -"

"After you turned me down?" she finished with a gentle smile. "Has this changed your mind, then?"

He could never let her know how sorely tempting it was to feel a soft body against his touch-starved skin; it was the knowledge that almost any body would do that kept him anchored. She deserved better. That much had not changed.

"I would like to say I've learned a lesson, and I plan to live each day as if it's my last," he replied, "but I'm afraid I'm not built that way."

"That is perhaps not a bad thing, for a commander."

"But here we are, alive. So I wasn't entirely wrong."

"Don't tempt fate," she said with a shudder. "I can't live through that again."

"I didn't see you in the Chantry. Were you…?"

"We fought. It was -" Horrors lurked behind her dark eyes. "When the Herald told us to retreat, some of us took refuge in the tavern. It was not a refuge for long."

He had seen Flissa come limping into the Chantry, her face streaked with soot and tears.

"Were you hurt?"

"A little burnt," she said, wriggling her gloved fingers. "Our healers do good work. But the Herald had to save me twice in a night; I'm afraid fire isn't much use in fighting fire."

"I'm happy that she did."

"It was a nightmare," she said starkly. "I was almost glad Luc wasn't there to see it. Templars -"

The single word painted an entire picture. Hunted, locked away, brutalised. Whispers of rebellion, annulment. War. And then just when the danger seemed to have passed, monsters descended from the mountains in a flurry of steel and fire and mad, red eyes. A mage's worst fear twisted into something even more horrific.

"I'm sorry," he said, and it felt wholly inadequate for the part he'd played.

"You weren't with them."

"I could have been."
"No." She stepped closer, laying a hand on his breastplate and tracing the Templar insignia with a little frown.

"If I hadn't left -"

"But you did." The corner of her mouth twitched. "Let me believe that you are a good man, Cullen Rutherford. There is so little left to believe in, nowadays."

"It is good to see you," he said sincerely. "If things were different…"

"What were we just saying?" Caro put a hand on his cheek, and his resolve nearly broke in two. "Different isn't always better."

Cullen imagined himself a hulking red-crystalled behemoth, as ugly on the outside as he felt on the inside. "I suppose you're right."

A crack of light from inside the tent became a triangle, and a footfall crunched in the snow. They jumped apart as though caught in some clandestine affair.

"Sorry," Juliet said cheerfully. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't," Cullen said, so stiffly as to destroy all credibility.

She looked to Caro, a smile of recognition lighting up her face. "You fought well the other night," she told her. "Flissa is lucky you were there."

The young mage wilted under her regard. "I couldn't lift the beam," she demurred.

"Nor could I on my own, probably. It didn't stop you from trying! How are your hands?"

"Better, thank you, Your Herald. Your Ladyship."

"Juliet is fine, please."

"I should go." She dropped a hurried curtsey. "Commander. Y- Juliet?"

The Herald watched her go with a raised brow. "I'm terrifying," she said. "Why am I terrifying? You should be more terrifying than me, surely? Even with the stammering."

"I do not stammer," he stammered.

They stood for a moment in awkward silence.

"How are -"

"Are you -"

"Please," she said. "You first."

"I trust you're well? You look well."

"I…thank you. I feel like a week-dead shade, so that's nice to hear. And you?"

"Well? Yes. As well as can be expected."

"That's not very well at all though, is it? Just when you think you've had enough archdemons for one age. Which one is it this time, do you think?"
"I really couldn't say." He realised his embarrassment was making him seem terse; somehow he was too Ferelden to navigate his way out of it. "You seem more…focused…than last night."

"Last night?" She cast about in her memory. "Oh yes. Well I can't say I've been serenaded since, oh, my seventh nameday. And that was with considerably less reverence."

"I can see how that might be overwhelming."

"Yes." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture so painfully reminiscent of Solona it made his throat tighten. "Anyway, if you'll excuse me…"

"Is there anything I can help you with, Lady Trevelyan?"

"It's dreadfully kind of you to offer, but the reason I came out here…” She cleared her throat delicately. "It's something I'd rather do alone, if you get my drift."

It took him a moment, then he blushed violently. "Oh I see…I do apologise. I'll be out of your way then. I, er…yes. Carry on."

She gave him a mock salute. "Yes, Commander."

"I didn't mean -"

"Cullen," she said with fond exasperation. "Really, it's fine. But I do need to -" She jerked her head significantly at a clump of bushes. "I'll talk to you some other time."

"Of course. I apologise for keeping you."

"Maker, Cullen. Try being a bit less…Ferelden, sometimes."

"I'm sorry," he said with a wry grin. "I'm not sure I know how."

"Clearly. We'll get you lessons."

"Right."

"Cullen?"

"Lady Trevelyan?"

"It's good to be alive, isn't it?"

*Most of the time.* "It is," he agreed. "Good night."

"Good night, Cullen."

"You've left me no choice."

_The young enchanter's voice shook; drained of mana, she slid to the floor as her barrier winked out._
The door groaned in protest as a templar axe bit into its heavy wood. The hole widened, but the door held fast.

"It's nothing personal," the man beside called through the gap. Behind them someone screamed; a running mage slipped on a floor slick with blood, and was hewn down.

"They're children."

Cullen didn't know what combination of magic and desperation had allowed the apprentices to prise the bars from the high window, but behind a barricade of desks and chairs he could see them making their escape. What manner of escape was uncertain; it was no small drop to the courtyard below, and they would still find themselves in the Gallows.

"They're mages."

"You can't have them."

The annulment was off to a poor start. The apprentices had been at their lessons when the Chantry exploded, and someone - Cullen suspected Bethany Hawke - had spirited away the youngest class, nobody knew where or how. They had found the door to this room sealed behind a barrier, blackened and blistered with its hinges melted shut.

There was a cry of pain as one of the children - mages, he corrected himself - landed outside. This group were barely in their teens, around the age his sister must be now -

The Right of Annulment was clear. Orders had been given. None could be spared.

"No choice," the teacher repeated, and before she could think twice she had stabbed a shard of wood deep into her forearm.

"Back!" Cullen shouted.

Blood rose in a cloud and he felt a sharp chill in the air, the rising shriek of Despair…

"They're children," he mumbled. It was cold, so cold, so cold.

"Commander Cullen." Someone was shaking him. Didn't they know the danger? A despair demon could take down the entire squadron if they didn't act fast.

"What?" he snapped, abruptly regaining his surroundings. A flurry of snow blew in through the open tent flap, cold enough to make his teeth ache.

"You wanted to be fetched, Ser," Jim said nervously. "The healer says it's nearly time."

"Yes," he said gruffly. "Thank you."

I do not want the blood of innocents on my hands. Was that what Solona had said to him, before he'd scoffed at her naivety? She'd been right, though; it was a stain that time did not erase.

He trudged to the healers' tent in the blue-washed predawn. A small party were already gathered by the single brazier: Juliet, Cassandra, Mother Gisele and a man he recognised as Ser Millward of the Ostwick Circle. A healer crouched over Ser Dalkeith's cot; the rattle of the templar's chest was the only sound to be heard.
The old man had made it out of Haven, but the cold had taken its toll - disease had spread in his chest, beyond the skill of the healers to fix. Over the past few days he’d deteriorated, until his lungs seemed to hold more fluid than air.

"It's a blessing," he'd heard a healer mutter the day previous. "Better this than keep losing his mind to the -" He'd noticed Cullen, and turned pale and silent.

"Thank you for coming, Cullen." Juliet approached and laid a hand on his arm. "He doesn't know us any more. I'm afraid the best we can do is stand vigil."

"I have faced armies
With You as my shield,
And though I bear scars beyond counting, nothing
Can break me except Your absence."

The gathering murmured as one, hands clasped before them. Juliet rejoined the circle, who shuffled to make room for Cullen.

"When I have lost all else, when my eyes fail me
And the taste of blood fills my mouth, then
In the pounding of my heart
I hear the glory of creation."

The familiar verses were a balm to Cullen; he let the Chant seep into his bones, dulling the memory of his nightmare.

"Do not grieve for me, Maker of All.
Though all others may forget You,
Your name is etched into my every step.
I will not forsake You, even if I forget myself."

Dalkeith's rattle slowed, faltered. Resumed.

"Maker, though the darkness comes upon me,
I shall embrace the Light. I shall weather the storm.
I shall endure.
What you have created, no one can tear asunder."

Outside the world lightened. The camp stirred, readying to move onwards to the promised sanctuary.

"Though all before me is shadow,
Yet shall the Maker be my guide."
I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.
For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."

Children. They're children they're children they're children - Juliet took his hand, and he remembered to breathe.

"Draw your last breath, my friends."

The old man did.

"Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky.
Rest at the Maker's right hand,
And be Forgiven."

And be forgiven. The blood of innocents. He fought the urge to snatch his hand away, afraid he might stain her.

"You respected him," he said later, as the templar's pyre faded to embers.

"He was never cruel," Juliet said, hugging herself against the chill. "Not friendly, but not cruel."

"That's a low bar by which to judge a man."

"Not really," she replied. "Not when you live in a system geared towards cruelty. Then plain decency becomes an act of rebellion."

He tried not to take it to heart; failed. "I thought Ostwick was one of the easier Circles?"

"Yes, well. Speaking of a low bar…Anyway." She threw him an arch look. "It seems you're getting more comfortable with having mages about."

"What you saw -"

"I'm sorry. It's really none of my business."

"Still," he said firmly. "It's important that you know there's nothing going on between us."

"Important?"

"She's nineteen."

"Nineteen," said Juliet with the world-weary air of a twenty-five year old. "Doesn't that feel forever ago?"

Forever and just yesterday. At nineteen he was a child, until suddenly he wasn't.

"What about the templar? He was going to be sent to Val Royeaux for trial, wasn't he?"

Cullen didn't need to ask which one she meant. "That was the plan, yes. The war complicated things: Celine's people were reluctant to take responsibility, the Chantry is in upheaval, the templars …but I don't need to explain any of this to you, do I?"
"I can see how it wouldn't be a priority."

"The thing is -" He scratched his neck. "He was still in our custody when Haven fell, and I'm told he wouldn't go with our soldiers when they evacuated the dungeons. He said he would rather take his chances with the templars."

"I see." Who could say if the red templars would have shown him mercy; the avalanche certainly wouldn't. Her mouth twisted short of a smile. "There's a joke in there somewhere, a templar refusing to leave the chantry...I'm sure Varric could come up with something."

"A man died," he rebuked her gently.

"Men. Women." Her voice went brittle, her eyes bleak, more grey than blue. "Children." A gust of wind blew over the pyre, an eddy of snow and ash dancing into the air. "Forgive me if I need to ration my grief."

"We're moving out, milady."

"Ser Millward!" Juliet forced the life back into her eyes. "Did you just call me milady?"

"I can't very well get away with Trevelyan these days, can I?" The bearded man grinned.

"I am sorry about Dalkeith."

"You and me both. Still, there wasn't much of the man left towards the end." He looked regretfully at the remains of the pyre. "Just me left now, from Ostwick."

"I heard about Bennick and the others. A shame," Juliet sighed. "I was going to marry him."

"No you weren't."

"No, I wasn't," she agreed cheerfully. "He did save my life, though. Well, chose not to kill me, which sort of amounts to the same thing." She linked arms with the templar. "Anyway, you still have me! Team Ostwick."

"I'll catch you up," Cullen told her.

"You'd better hurry. If I get to the fortress first I'm definitely stealing the best room."

The stark mood from before seemed to have vanished on the wind. At least, it would take an eye more astute than Cullen's to see past that laughing mask.

The snow sank away beneath his feet; with each laboured footfall he heard not the crunch of his boots, but the slow rattle of a man's dying breath.

Chilled hands struggled with the buckles of his pack, but it didn't take long to find the case bearing Andraste's likeness, or to unstopper the bottle within. Just the clean metal scent of it seemed to sharpen his senses.

"I shall not be left to wander the dark roads of the Beyond," he muttered. Just a tip of the bottle, a dash of blue in the snow, and he'd be free of its sickly song. Even if he was too late to avoid the slow decay of his mind, at least he could cut one more tie with a life he had come to despise.

It wouldn't undo the past.

Andraste's painted image offered no counsel. Over the years he had imagined that face by turns to
seem benevolent, resolute, severe, mocking. Now he looked again in the crisp mountain light. Clumsily rendered, chipped, faded, blank. Tired. And why not? She carried the hopes and regrets of a million faithful. *Forgive me if I need to ration my grief.*

The day might yet come where a choice was laid before him: return to lyrium's lightning blue embrace, or fail. He would not, *could not* fail Juliet. She carried the fate of the world, and it was no small weight.

He pressed the stopper back in and closed the lid on Andraste's bleak stare. For her Herald, for Juliet, he could bear this one little vial a while longer.

A tiny leaden weight at the bottom of his pack: he fancied he could hear it rattle in time with his footsteps. The *clink* of glass, the *crunch* of snow, the wet rasp of a templar's lungs as he drowned in a lyrium haze.

Chapter End Notes

We're skipping to established relationship in the next chapter, but you can read In the Light of Day if you want to catch up on the juicy bits! Thanks for reading this far.
Dear Juliet,

Let me start by reminding you that I've never been very good at politics, or the Game, or much at all beyond novels and clothes and other frivolous things.

I don't expect you'll take this as an excuse. You shouldn't. I've been unforgivably ignorant and cruel, yes, cruel, even without meaning to be. I should have reached out sooner, it just seemed as though you were doing important things with important people and the last thing you would want is a letter from your air-headed sister. I know you said you liked hearing from me but that was in the Circle, where I'm sure nothing interesting ever went on.

Now I've read back on what I've written and realised I haven't even told you what I wanted to, and isn't that just like me? It's this: I didn't know.

That's obviously not the full story. I knew Mama had cut ties with you. And Father, obviously, because he's sick and weak and tired and just lets her walk all over him nowadays. If I'd been a sister worth the name I'd have reached out to you then, because it was monstrous…but then it's Mama, and she's been that way about you for a long time.

Anyway, people were gossiping the other day, as people do, and someone asked me if I felt very foolish now that you were the leader of the Inquisition and not the Divine's murderer (which I never believed for a second!) and when I asked what they meant - you know I'm an idiot, Jules, I always have been - that's when I found out Mama had disowned you on behalf of all the Trevelyans, and I hadn't said a word to contradict her.

I know how this will seem, coming as it does months and months late. Even Mama, would you believe it, speaks well of the Inquisition, but I'm sure pride won't let her reach out to you herself for ages yet.

So the purpose of this letter is to throw myself on your mercy and to say that if you can find the time to write to such a wretched, awful creature as myself, if even to tell me to throw myself into the sea and die, I would welcome a letter in return.

Still your sister if you'll have me,

Lavinia.

"There!" Juliet said, pointing. "Is that something?"

"I don't see a thing, Freckles."

"Can you see over the ramparts?" Bull raised his hands in placation. "Genuine question."

"Oh, I'm going to write you so fat," Varric grumbled. "Fat and stupid."

"Want me to lift you, Boss?" he offered, unperturbed.
Juliet looked down at the icy rocks far below. "Er…no thanks." She sighed as she rested her head on her arms. "It's a day since the forward scouts started coming in. How far can they be?"

"Surprised Krem's not up here," he rumbled. "The poor sucker hasn't seen his girl in weeks."

Juliet lifted her head. "Girl? What girl?"

"A scout," Varric said. Of course the dwarf would know before she did.

"A mage scout," Bull added with a roll of his shoulders. "You can take the boy out of Tevinter…"

"You're one to talk: you've got your own boy out of Tevinter."

"And he's a mage," said Varric.

"And I plan on taking him, if he ever shows up." Bull pushed back from the ramparts with a grunt. "Right. I'm going to wait in the tavern. Who's with me?"

"I thought I saw -" No, she realised, it was just the afternoon sun glinting on a patch of ice. "I suppose I could drink."

It was a mere half-pint later that the shout went up - two pints for the Iron Bull - that the first of the Inquisition's returning troops had been spotted on the path. They were fewer than had set out for the Arbor Wilds; some, like the Blades of Hessarian, had returned to the field to await their next orders, while others would never again cross the bridge to Skyhold.

In her pocket Juliet hoarded the scraps of vellum that had arrived piecemeal by raven: neat columns of names to add to the dead that dogged her footsteps.

For now, happier times. In front rode the advisors. Josephine like a bright jewel, Leliana hooded and inscrutable. And Cullen, finding her like a beacon amongst the crowd, his weary face breaking into a grin that Varric might have described as lovesick.

It was their first public reunion, on the heels of a ferocious battle and an unexpected separation. She stayed frozen in place, not sure if he'd welcome the greeting she wanted to give him in front of all the Inquisition. Maker but she'd missed that look in his eyes, at once soft with emotion and hard with intent, the look that cut through to her core and left her quivering.

She did not have to wonder long. As soon as a groom took his reins he was vaulting from his horse, reaching her in a few strides and pulling her hard to his chest. A ragged cheer went up and he didn't even seem to care; he buried his face in her hair and clung to her as if she might slip away.

As if she would want to.

But, "Cullen, you're crushing me," she was forced to admit. "Armour, remember?"

He relented at once. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I should have…it's been so long."

"He was very loud without you," Cole said, appearing from…somewhere.

"I was not!"

"Careful kisses, lips full, soft, precious. Mouth mapping every freckle on her br-"

"Thank you, Cole. I'll take it from here."
“Yeah you will.” Sera, somehow already having pilfered from the kitchens and speaking around a mouthful of apple, sauntered by with a grin.

Juliet could hardly find it in herself to be embarrassed, held as she was in that amber gaze. His hands had fallen to her sides, thumbs digging into her hip bones. She tugged at his breastplate - too much metal between his skin and hers, too much fabric, too much.

Josephine cleared her throat delicately. "Perhaps we should convene in the war room for a debriefing -"

"No," they said in unison.

"Perhaps in the morning, Josie," Leliana interjected smoothly. "We are all saddle-weary. I know I could use a bath."

"I should clean up too," Cullen murmured in Juliet's ear. "We didn't stop for long on the road. I think I'm more dirt than man, at this point."

She was mortified to hear herself whine; please, Maker, let nobody else have heard…

"Loud," said Cole.

"Cole."

"Join me in the tavern, kid." Varric clapped a hand on the boy's back. "You can tell me all about it."

Cullen, red-faced, brushed a strand of hair back from her temple. "They do call them rogues," he murmured. "When did you start wearing your hair that way again?"

She tugged on her braid, suddenly self-conscious. "It's practical. Is it - do you mind?"

"Why should I mind?"

Because Solona… she wouldn't say her name out here, not in front of everyone. Cullen leaned down and spoke low in her ear. "I quite like being the only one who gets to see you with your hair down."

Fingers tangled in her tresses; sweeping the strands free of her neck to make way for his hungry mouth; fist at the nape of her neck pulling her head back so her lips more closely met his -

"I hope Cole's occupied," she whispered.

"Maker, me too."

"Bathe fast."

"I will."

She didn't have to wait long. He took the stairs two, perhaps three at a time; they came together like giddy teenagers, all laughing and grabby. His mouth found hers; there was nothing careful about it.

"Hey," she protested once she found breath. "What about my precious lips?"
Cullen chuckled, swiping the seam of her mouth with his tongue. "In my imagination I could take my time." He walked her backwards towards her bed, unclasping her tunic as they went. "Now you're here, I find I don't have that luxury."

The smell of the baths clung to him: steam and lye soap and herbs. No armour, just a soft linen shirt and breeches slung low around his hips. He must have traversed the main hall like that, no doubt in anyone's mind what he was about. It was entirely out of character, and enough to stoke the warmth at her core to a molten, swirling inferno.

They tumbled onto the bed. She clung hard to him; if she could she would have turned herself into liquid and enveloped him, their every molecule touching. When she leaned in to kiss him he placed a warning finger on her lips.

"Don't disappear again."

She flicked her tongue against his fingertip, smirking when his hips twitched towards hers. "It's the furthest thing from my mind right now, I assure you."

Cullen's free hand worked its way down the front of her breeches. "Three times now." Into her smalls, and a ripple ran through her body when his finger slipped inside her.

"Three?" she gasped. ""The Wilds." He grabbed her neck, pulled her down and flicked his tongue against her lips. "Adamant," he continued, angling away as she tried to deepen the contact.

"Cullen," she pleaded. His fingers worked between her legs; she felt herself slipping towards the edge and she hadn't even kissed him, she needed so badly to kiss him. "I didn't mean to, I need -"

"Redcliffe."

She ground against his hand; shuddered and twitched, her voice turning high and thin. "That doesn't count - you weren't even - oh - I was back before you knew - fuck, I'm going to - "

"Yes," he said, "you are," and he finished her with a few deft strokes.

After lying limp on top of him for a moment, she finally drew her head back and let his face swim into focus. The smallest of frowns marred his forehead; his pupils all but swallowed up his irises, merely a sliver of honey around a pool of black.

"Hi," she breathed.

Cullen's lips twitched, and he reached up to trace her cheekbone. "Hello there."

Then with the speed of a cat he flipped them. His hands captured her wrists and pinned them above her shoulders. When she laughed, he shook his head. "It counts," he growled.

At last he kissed her, licking into her mouth, their tongues tangling.

"Doesn't," she gasped when she could think straight. Cullen raised himself up on his elbows, searching her face with a frightening intensity.

"You were gone," he said hoarsely. "There was nothing - the eluvian was shattered, rocks thrown everywhere, no sign of any of you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "There was an ancient magister flying at us, our options were limited…"
I sent a raven as soon as I could."

"I know it's not your fault." Cullen rested his face in the crook of her neck. "I'm just afraid...I can't lose you any more."

"You'll just have to keep me from disappearing." She wriggled and caught his mouth again in an ungainly, lips-mismatched kiss. "Do you have any ideas on how you might do that?"

He rocked his hips against her and yes, there it was again, bubbling up inside her. "I suppose I could keep you pinned here."

"Pinning sounds good." She strained against his grip just enough to make him tighten it. His eyes turned narrow and dangerous, voice pitched low enough to make her blood surge.

"It does, doesn't it?"

---

Dearest Vini,

I don't believe you're stupid. But I also don't believe you're cruel, and I don't believe you'd let Mother keep you from doing what you wanted. I take your letter at face value, and I do not forgive you, my silly sister, because there is nothing to forgive.

I have made a new family of sorts here. Still, it brings me more joy than you can imagine to know that you are still on my side. I will always find time for you.

What I do find unforgivable is the lack of news! How are my nephews? I was able to find out that Alec's baby girl arrived safely, but I am sadly lacking any more detail. I don't suppose Alec can be reconciled as well? I will try not to get my hopes up. What of Father's illness?

Mother can hold on to her pride a while longer, Maker knows I'm not in a hurry to hear from her.

Write soon!

Juliet.

---

The question of Samson hung heavy between them.

"Have you spoken with him?" she asked that first night. She lay curled into his chest, drinking in the familiar golden warmth of his presence.

Cullen's arm had been casually slung around her waist; she felt him tense. "Who?"

"Cullen."

He moved as if to withdraw but she made herself still and heavy, pinning his arm beneath her even as she kissed his shoulder in apology. "No," he admitted.
"Do you plan to?"

"Not while I can avoid it." Giving up on escape, he used his trapped arm to drag her closer. "Do we have to talk about this now?" he said in that voice, and she let the matter slide in favour of other, more pressing needs.

Samson arrived under escort, whisked away to the holding cells in the dead of night. Through all those layers of stone she could tell his presence itched at Cullen, could hear it in his pacing footsteps, in the silent moments he spent staring at the floor as if his gaze could bore through to the dungeons and the man within.

He had to be judged. In order to be judged, he must be understood. Cullen fielded all her questions with tense monosyllables, until it took more energy than she could muster even to ask. Conscious or not, that was probably his intent.

"I'm going to see him tomorrow."

Cullen was bent over some papers on his desk: Maker only knew in what state his eyesight would end up. She should requisition more candles. Perhaps Solas had the right idea, studying by veillfire?

It didn't escape her how his shoulders stiffened. The coldness of his voice, however, took her by surprise.

"Why should you do that?"

Juliet stifled an irritated sigh. "What's my title, Cullen?"

He turned to face her; he looked contrite, and pale, and so very tired, in a way he hadn't since the worst of his battle with lyrium. "I'm sorry," he said, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. "I know it's your job. Perhaps you wouldn't need to if I did my job better."

She perched on his desk, and by force of habit he moved to stand between her knees, forehead pressed to hers.

"Enough of that," she scolded him. "Perhaps you were right not to meet with him. Your history together might not be an asset."

"Delicately put," he said with a small, bitter laugh. There was yet a little too much force in the way he gripped her thighs, an excess of tension in his jaw.

"You still don't want me to."

"He did try to kill you."

"That's not it. Everybody tries to kill me." She ran blunt nails through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. "Talk to me, Cullen. You worked so hard to catch him, and now here he is. Shouldn't you be glad?"

His eyes drifted shut beneath her touch. "I am," he said hoarsely, then amended, "I should be."

She waited, feeling the subtle tremor in his hands.

"It's Kirkwall," he explained, each word drawn out like an arrow from flesh. "I left it behind. And now... now it's followed me home. No. I brought it home." There was something of the City of
Chains in his slow exhale: a hint of rust, and steel, and salt spray. She'd heard it in Varric's voice when he spoke of his hometown, and Hawke's too - anyone who lingered long in Kirkwall was left dragging some of her chains behind them.

"Somehow it didn't occur to me that he'd let himself be taken alive, all this time. Every end I pictured - Maker help me, I could even picture you failing, but somehow this…"

Juliet tilted his chin back to look in his shadowed eyes. "Are you afraid of what he might tell me?"

"I'm -" He couldn't hold her gaze, seeming to shrink under scrutiny. "I'm afraid of how you'll look at me. If you'll look at me at all."

"I'm not ignorant of your past, Cullen." He shook his head. "Then tell me first."

"I can't. Kirkwall… I can't."

Fear turned her sharp. "You'd rather I didn't know?"

"Of course I would," he snapped, jerking away from her touch with a scowl. "I would rather none of it had happened!"

"That's not how this works, Cullen."

"Do you think I don't know that?"

"Then be reasonable!" she pleaded.

"I can't."

"Cullen stared out the window, his fingers almost digging into the stone sill. "I wouldn't expect you to know how I feel.""

"Oh, fuck off. You're really going to refuse to talk to me then tell me I don't know?" She swivelled to glare at him. "What do you want from me, Cullen?"

His lip curled. "Since understanding seems too much to ask for, why don't you start by leaving me alone?"

"If you think I'm leaving things like this -"

"Go!" he all but roared, slamming his hand down on the desk. She flinched, and he reeled away as if struck.

Juliet struggled to calm her racing pulse, unsure of how their disagreement had escalated so fast; Cullen slumped against the window with his head in his hands, misery clad in fur and silverite.

At any other time she would go to comfort him, but being the target of his rage had hurt more than she cared to examine.

"Shit," she swore, sliding from the desk. "I should go."

"I don't mean to take it out on you," he said through gritted teeth.

*Then don't.* "We'll talk about it. Or not." She grasped the base of her braid, squeezing hard enough to burn. "Fuck, Cullen…” Conflict between them was so rare; she felt it like a physical knot in her chest, dark and wrong. It coiled up her throat and slid behind her teeth, words spitting out like a bite. "Maybe you should worry less about what Samson might say to me, and more about how you speak to me."
"Juliet -" He turned to her, stricken, but she held up a silencing hand.

"I'm going."

Wind caught the door on her exit; it slammed with a resounding crack. She faced the icy breeze head on, hoping it might freeze some of the red from her cheeks.

Stupid. She'd faced demons and undead and worse, rushing into the thick of battle without a second thought. Yet an unexpected raised voice could turn her to a shaken apprentice child, every nerve screaming danger. It wasn't even as if she'd been physically disciplined; Ostwick wasn't a place for flagrant abuses, and her name carried more weight than it would in other Circles. It was enough to know that they could. They were allowed. The knowledge alone was enough to make a templar's rage a terrible thing.

Perhaps she should delay. Go and have a drink. A spar. No. She would pull herself together. So what, if Samson saw her hands tremble? She wasn't the one in chains; he didn't have the power to wound her.

Squaring her shoulders, she took the stairs that would lead her to the dungeons.

There wasn't much to him, stripped of his red lyrium armour. Tall, yes, but stooped. Strongly-built, but hollow-chested. Sunken eyes tinged red with lyrium and skin nearly grey. He sneered when he saw who had come.

"Perfect," he grated. "Here to gloat, are you?"

"Hardly." Juliet dragged over an upended crate, sitting down in front of the cell. Feet planted wide, elbows on knees, wrists dangling. Not cowed, but not threatening. She cocked her head. "Are they treating you well?"

"Like you care."

She let a single arched eyebrow do the talking. If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't ask, it said.

Samson relented. "Well enough. As well as I deserve."

"I hope better than that."

Finally she got a laugh out of him, if the bitter huff of air could be called that. "I reckon that's fair." He ran a hand over thinning hair. "I'm fed. Dosed. Only the blue stuff." Bleary eyes turned to the open wall. "It gets cold."

It got cold in Sahrnia. Blue-lipped villagers packed into wagons like cattle, the wind cutting right through them. "What do you need? More blankets? A cloak?"

His eyes darted between her and the ruined stone, looking for a trap. "A cloak would help," he said grudgingly. "Blankets too, I suppose. Or furs."

"I'll see it done."

"What d'you want?"

"It's not conditional."
"You're here though, aren't you?" With an audible popping of joints he stood, glaring down at her. "So you want something."

Juliet sat up straighter. "We've had a few people through these dungeons. Driven by greed, or fear, or the love of power, or…" Ritual throwing of goats? No point in getting sidetracked. "I'm just curious where you fit."

He snorted his contempt. "You need to put me in a category, is that it? Can't have any shades of grey in the Chantry's Inquisition."

"The Inquisition isn't the Chantry."

"No? Hard to tell from the outside."

"We're not forcing lyrium into anyone," she countered. "Can you say the same?"

"I did what I had to."

"Please. Tell yourself that if you like, but I'm not buying it. I saw what you did in Sahrnia. Not just your own people, but…" They died, metal in their voices and fear in their eyes, crystal growing through them like a sharp cancer. "It's not a death I'd wish on anyone."

Samson winced. "It doesn't matter," he growled. "This is all going to burn, and good fucking riddance. Think you can take the high ground, Inquisitor? Fucking the man who was Meredith Stannard's attack dog?"

Here we go, she thought.

"Could be a smart move, taking him into your bed. But don't go thinking it'll save you when the Circles come back. He cares too much for the rules."

"When the Circles come back?" she queried drily. "I thought you said the world was going to burn."

"Clever, Inquisitor. Either way you're fucked." He crossed his arms. "Not going to deny it then? No Cullen loves me, he wouldn't do that to me?"

Juliet shrugged. "It's not worth addressing. I know him better than you do."

Samson's laugh degenerated into a wet cough. "Ha! You think so? D'you know we shared a room when he first arrived? He never thought much of me." A derisive curl of his lip made plain his feelings on that. "Too willing to bend the rules, didn't take the mage threat seriously enough. And didn't he let me know it, once he was in charge. What a bloody joke that was! From a liability in Ferelden to Knight-Captain in his twenties. And you know why?"

I'm sure you'll tell me. A moment's pause and he continued, pacing his cell like a caged dragonling.

"That man believed in the chain of command like it was Andraste's own word. I told him from the start Meredith was crazy, but he wasn't hearing it. You didn't question those above you, and you didn't let those below question. Cullen hated mages just enough to set his conscience aside but not enough to take things too far. No, a Karras or an Elrik might have embarrassed the Order. Cullen put a pretty face on things and turned a blind eye to anything ugly. Right up until it was too late. Fuck, even past that. The annulment shouldn't have happened."
Samson paused in his rant, looking her up and down.

"You're not telling me anything I don't know."

"And you let him fuck you?" he said disbelievingly. "Not too picky, are you?"

"He's not that man any more."

"Tell yourself that." Gripping the bars, he peered at her through his reddened eyes. "He's no more than a puppet for whoever's yanking his strings. Hypocrisy wrapped in denial. Did he tell you how he rallied the troops before we put the mages to the sword? How he led the charge on the apprentices?"

I will not flinch. She raised her chin, meeting his bleary eyes with a flat gaze.

"No, he didn't. We killed mages that day, Inquisitor, and he was right in amongst it. It was ugly work. They couldn't surrender or retreat. Some got out, some fought back. Some became abominations, as if we gave them a choice. Mostly they just died. Begging, or running away or just frozen, we ran them through just the same." He pushed back from the bars. "Think on that when you judge me. Think on how he'd have cut you down without ever looking you in the eyes."

"You did it too," she pointed out. "You followed orders."

"Like I can forget it." Gravelly sorrow in his voice. "They've got you by the balls, the Chantry. From the first draught they own you. Sooner than that if you're sold into it the way most are. Third sons, bastards and orphans. Kids."

"How does this make you any better than him?"

"I'm not pretending to be better," he sneered. "I'm not even pretending to be good. It's believing in it I can't forgive."

"Cullen left. He stopped lyrium." She saw from his face that the second part, at least, was news to him.

"He got a better offer, is what happened. I can't say getting off the lyrium would be easy, but he'd have a better chance than most. He wasn't on the streets with an empty belly. Given the choice of that or the red…"

"It wasn't a choice, though, was it? You didn't give them choice. You tricked them into becoming monsters. And when Corypheus fails - when he fails - they'll be worse off than under the Chantry. Did you ever think of the cost of failure?"

"I gave them glory. Strength."

"You gave them madness and death. You saw what it did to Meredith, you knew."

"The Chantry should pay -"

"Everybody pays. Demons and darkness, that's what your future holds! I've seen it."

Samson's shoulders slumped. "I just wanted…he gave us a second chance."

"Do you still believe that?"

"Does it matter?"
"Yes." She leaned forward, clasping her hands before she quite knew she was doing it. Beseeching. "People can change. For the better, for the worse. Back again. If you believe that, maybe another chance is on the cards."

A flicker of doubt crossed his face. "You'll do what you want regardless."

"True. But what I want is subject to change." Juliet chewed on her top lip, the next words coming with difficulty. "We gave Maddox a funeral."

Samson's eyes closed. "I should thank you, I suppose."

"I didn't do it for you," she said without rancour. "Whose idea was the poison?"

"His." A bare fist slammed against the bars; his knuckles would bruise. "I don't care if you believe me."

"It's not what I'd expect from a Tranquil," she admitted. "He wasn't what I expected."

"I owed him," Samson rasped. "I shouldn't have… I let him hope. I should have torn up those letters and told him not to be so fucking stupid."

"Is giving hope so bad?" she asked gently.

"In Kirkwall? Yes. He was a nice kid. A kid."

"I know."

"That's the system your lover protected."

"I know," she said gently. "He regrets it, for what it's worth."

"We'll see what it's worth," he muttered, gracing her with a smile-without-a-smile. "And this other chance?"

"Conscription. Not freedom. And you'd have to work with Cullen."

"Think he'll agree to that?"

"He still takes orders."

Another laugh-cough. "Perhaps he deserves you after all."

"I'll take that as a compliment, however it's meant. And our arcanist will want to study you."

"Study? You mean dissect?"

She shrugged. "It's possible, I guess. But she'll do it so cheerfully you won't even feel the scalpel."

He studied her through narrowed eyes. "You've already made up your mind, haven't you?"

"Mostly," she admitted.

"Why? Why give me a chance?"

"To prove a point." She rested her chin on her hand. "Now. Tell me about Kirkwall."
It was near dusk by the time she emerged from the dungeons. Light spilled from Cullen's tower - she wondered if he was alone, or taking out his frustrations on some poor scout or messenger.

Perhaps he was ready to see her now. They would apologise for their hasty words, skirt around the gaping cracks between them long enough for him to take her up the ladder to bed. She would feel his fingertips catch just a little on her skin, calloused from swordplay.

But it wasn't play, was it?

The tavern was blessedly empty save its most rusted-on occupants. Cabot glowering behind the bar, and Maryden taking advantage of the quiet to tune her lute. Krem sat in his usual corner, an Inquisition scout on his lap and a lovestruck smile on his face.

"Inquisitor." The bartender greeted her with little more than a nod.

"Ale, please. No…brandy." Her stomach was a tight ball, too small to hold the quantity of ale she'd need to numb her feelings. "How is your apothecary?" 

"She's your apothecary," he said, uncorking the bottle with the minimum of flourish. "To me, she's something else entirely. And superlative, thanks for asking." He nodded over her shoulder. "You've got company."


A shy smile spread across the girl's face. "Caro is fine, Your Worship."

She glanced over to the corner. "That's what Krem calls me." Bull's lieutenant raised his tankard. "A good man, that one."

Caro blushed. "The best." She fidgeted with her gloves. "The Iron Bull was wondering if you would join the Chargers for a drink. He would ask you himself, but I think his ankle pains him."

Taking a swig of her brandy, she considered her options. She wasn't looking for company, but Bull did nothing without a reason. "Fine, I'll bite."

"Your Worship?"

"Lead the way, Caro." Her limbs already tingled with warmth as they crossed the common room. "Krem."

"Your Worship."

"I hear I've been summoned."

"Boss." Bull shifted in the shadows by the window. "How you doing?"

"I've been better."

"You can't drink alone."

"That's kind of you, Bull, but right now -"

"You're not hearing me, Boss." The chair groaned in complaint as he sat forward, flickering shadows cast on the crevasses of his face. "You can't drink alone. Sit at that bar and before too long some asshole's going to want to bend your ear. Then it'll be hundreds of 'em. You want a quiet drink that's fine, but you sit with us." He sat back, further torturing his hapless chair. "I'll sit here.
Krem and Scout there will sit on your other side and try not to be too loved up."

"Chief."

"Rest of the Chargers'll run interference, break some faces if they have to. Their own, if it comes to that. You won't be bothered."

Grumbling, she took an empty seat. "Not even by you?"

"I know where you've come from. Can take a guess at the kind of things you heard there." His scarred lip twisted. "You need to talk about it?"

"Yes," she admitted, swirling her already half-empty glass. "That's the problem."

"He'll come to the party eventually."

"No Dorian tonight?"

"Hmph. Cabot's got a limit on public displays of affection, and those two have already hit it."

Krem didn't respond, busy whispering something in Caro's ear. The two of them together... <i>glowed</i>, and happy as she was for them, tonight it made her heart hurt.

"Scout, huh? Is she one of the Chargers now?"

"Harding's got plenty of use for her, otherwise I'd think about it." Bull raised his voice. "It's not like we've got a mage, is it Dalish?"

"Definitely <i>not</i>, Chief!"

"You're good, though? You and Dorian?"

"Oh yeah." A satisfied smirk spread over his face. "We're more than good." He raised his tankard. "And you will be too."

Juliet stared down at her brandy, the colour of Cullen's eyes by torchlight. She smiled, though it made her face ache, and lifted her glass. "I'll drink to that."

<i>Dear Juliet,</i>

<i>Or should I call you Inquisitor now? It hardly matters for my purpose, which is to let you know (as if you hadn't noticed) what a blind idiot I've been. Honestly, until Lavinia wrote to me it hadn't occurred to me that you'd take Mother's nonsense for anything other than just that. Mel has given me such a scolding about it, and you know most days she could be mistaken for a spirit of tolerance!</i>

<i>Even without that nastiness I should have written before now. Although I hate to use my daughter as an excuse, she really does take up so much of my energy that other obligations quite slide out of my head. I'll make a terrible bann one day! Not that father is much better nowadays – I know you can still read that, but I strike it out anyway because it's unworthy. Sickness comes to us all someday if we live long enough, and he was a good bann and a good father, to most of us at least.</i>

<i>You've done us proud, little Jules. Better than we deserve, I dare say. The Trevelyans haven't treated you well. However much money Father threw at the Chantry it doesn't make up for</i>
growing up without a parent's love, and I'm ashamed it took becoming a father myself to understand that. I never gave a fig that you were a mage, but if marriage has taught me anything it's that these things sometimes need to be said to be known.

Jules, I should have told you years ago. I'm sorry that I had a head so full of my own importance that I neglected the little sister who loved me.

Perhaps this is why I don't write letters often! I apologise for my sentimentality - if you were here in person I would make up for it by pulling your hair or pinching your nose, but I'm not sure if one's allowed to do that to an Inquisitor.

Baby Margot is...everything and more. I think she looks like you as a baby (funny little fat thing you were) even if mother denies it. When father gets confused I sometimes catch him calling her Pumpkin.

Perhaps it's just that the world has changed now, but when I look at her I can't imagine ever letting her be taken from us. Magic or no magic, she will always be my child.

Did I mention I'll make a terrible Bann?

I'm sealing and sending this now, before I decide it's too terribly maudlin to be read. I hope to see you again someday soon, and I will tell little Margot nothing but good things about her Aunt Juliet.

Your brother, Alec.

Many hours later she found Cullen's door unlocked. Beside an empty wine bottle and a rumpled stack of reports, a candle had been left to burn down to a stub.

"Cullen?" she called uncertainly. The ladder at least was stable, even if she was not. He lay bathed in moonlight with his curls tousled, peaceful as a child in sleep. A surge of near-unbearable affection made her chest tighten.

He didn't stir as she stripped away her boots and breeches, her tunic and leggings. When she curled into his side, bare skin to skin, he pulled her close before waking in surprise.

"Hello," he said drowsily.

"Hi." She didn't look up, pressing her lips to his chest, but she felt the kiss on top of her head.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too."

"Do you still want to talk...?"

"Yes," she said, nuzzling closer. "But not now. Now I want this."

"This is good."

"Yes," she agreed. "This is good."

They held close to each other and let the Fade take them.
"Not everyone will be pleased with this judgement."

"They never are," Juliet said, unclasping her formal tunic.

"Does this see justice done?"

She didn't look at Cullen as she wiped the powder from her face. "When you say justice, do you mean that or revenge?"

"Sometimes the two are the same."

"He's useful."

"And the people he killed?"

"Are dead." She finally turned to face him, hand on hip. "You wanted me to kill him? He's already dying. This way he can help us."

Cullen seemed unconvinced. "And will he?"

"Dagna will study him. As far as intelligence…I believe he will, but the deciding factor is probably your attitude."

He frowned as she changed into travelling garb. "Where are you going?"

"Where are we going," she corrected him.

"Fine. Where are you and…whichever of your companions…going?"

"Me and you," she clarified. "You owe me a ride."

Cullen's eyes widened in shock. "I can't possibly! I have duties -"

"I've taken care of that."

"Briefings -"

"Covered."

"Meetings -"

"Postponed. You're taking two days off, and that's an order."

"Juliet." He closed the distance between them, taking her by the shoulders. "Is this wise right now? Corypheus could strike at any time -"

"That's always been the case. Besides, we won't be far. Leliana knows where to find us." Juliet curled a hand around the back of his neck and drew him down, ghosting her lips over his; she felt him tense for a split second before trying to deepen the kiss, and pulled away. "We need some time together without distractions. Now, go change. Dennet will have the horses ready in an hour."

His expression could have been a smile or a grimace; she felt she had lost the ability to read him,
somewhere along the way. "As you wish, Inquisitor."

It wasn't until she heard the door closed that she sat heavily on her bed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Please, Andraste, let this make things better and not worse."

It helped to be out in the fresh, cold air. Cullen was completely at ease on horseback, the burden of command seeming to lighten the farther they strayed from Skyhold. She was beyond relieved to see him laugh as they galloped across the high plains, curls escaping the rigid control under which he kept them.

It had been true when she said they weren't going far. Two hours' ride took them to a frozen lake, a little stone house by its shore next to a ruined pier. Its history was unknown; scouts had stumbled upon the abandoned cottage in the early days of their presence at Skyhold and patched it up suitable for shelter during snowstorms. A compact stable held chaff for the horses and a trough that Juliet thawed with a glyph; inside firewood was neatly stacked by the grate and fresh blankets lay folded at the end of the bed.

"It's beautiful," Cullen said, staring out over the blue-green ice. "It reminds me of Haven."

Unexpected tears pricked Juliet's eyes: the familiar ache of grief and regret for those lost, layered over an odd sense of homesickness for the cold, windy little town by the lake. "I didn't appreciate it until it was gone."

"It had its charms," he agreed. "It's where I met you."

"I remember," she said with a grin. "You were grumpy."

"I still am." His eyes grew soft. "Juliet, I -"

Her hand came to his cheek, thumb pressed softly across his lips. "Shh. Let's brush the horses down and start the fire. We have all night."

The curve of his lips sent a thrill through her. "All night? I like the sound of that."

"Good." The sway in her step as she made towards the stables was no accident.

The sky had greyed by the time they had finished their simple lunch, but the fire burned clean and warm and the windows were of thick, if warped, glass. Juliet settled into Cullen's lap on the floor, her back against his chest and his chin on her shoulder.

"I've been unfair," he murmured.

"I shouldn't have pressed you to talk before you were ready."

"No." His arms squeezed her. "You have the right to know everything. Maker knows, it's been long enough."

"You've spoken about Kirkwall. About the man you were. And I've spoken to Hawke, and Varric. And Samson."

"I doubt Samson told you anything that was untrue," he said. "I can be less sure about the others… but you deserve to hear it from me."
She waited, rubbing gentle circles on his wrists.

"I didn't see them as people," he continued. "Mages...mages like you. It began with Kinloch, with the fear and the anger. Then it became something else. I couldn't have...I couldn't have overlooked what I did, if I'd let myself believe they were just people and not things to be feared. The Order does little to challenge those beliefs. Meredith went further and encouraged them."

She felt the movement of his throat. "These sound like excuses. I know they're not. But the voices that challenged me - Samson, Hawke - they were too few to make me see clearly. In my eyes, their motives were suspect. Hawke was the sister, the daughter of apostates. Samson was...unprofessional. My head was in the sand, even when I heard things." His throat bobbed again, convulsively.

Juliet squeezed his hands.

"Kinloch was terrible. Unthinkable. It changed me into...but at the same time I could make sense of it. I could tell - mostly - good from evil. But Kirkwall -" He shook his head. "When she ordered Hawke's death it was like waking from a dream into a nightmare. She was a monster, and I followed her. What did that make me, if not a monster as well?" His voice caught. "Everybody judges Blackwall so harshly. At least he didn't know when he gave his orders. He didn't know children would die."

Juliet twisted in his arms, his wet salt tears dampening her cheek. "They weren't your orders."

"The minute I passed them on they became my orders. The minute I carried them out without question. I couldn't..." His face twisted with grief. "I couldn't order my troops to do what I was unwilling to do myself. The apprentices -"

"Hush." She wiped his eyes with a thumb. "It's done now."

"I should have been hauled before you in chains. I should have faced something - anything -"

He broke down then, and it was hard to say how much time passed while she held his shaking body, awful sobs wracking that solid frame she knew so intimately. "I'm here, Cullen," she murmured over and over. "I'm here."

"Forgive me?" he croaked at last, and she smoothed the damp curls back from his forehead.

"It's not for me to forgive."

"Who, then?"

"I don't know," she said gently. "The Maker? All I can do is tell you that you're not that man anymore. You're not even the man you were in Haven. You try, and try, and try to be better. And you are." Her lips pressed hard against his, chaste and sincere. "You are my love. You are my home. I believe in every breath you breathe."

Incredulous, Cullen stared at her. "I don't deserve you. I could never deserve you."

"You could," she told him. "Now. Let's get you cleaned up."

A rag and some cool water soothed his tear-stained face; then warm to clean the sweat of travel from his skin, bared as she went. He returned the favour. At last, flushed and damp, they looked into each other's eyes.
"No distance between us." Juliet pressed against him, her thighs hugging his hips. "No secrets, no silence." Cullen ran his hands up her bare back, and she bent to scrape her teeth against the tendon of his neck. "No shame."

"I can't promise the last," he said raggedly.

"No shame," she whispered in his ear, "that isn't shared."

"Juliet," he whispered like a prayer. She guided him down to the floor, lifting his hands to her breasts. He knew what to do, kneading and stroking and plucking until her smalls grew unbearably damp, until the tingling warmth at her core could be neglected no longer. She made quick work of his laces, smiling when his cock bobbed up against his belly.

"Did I mention you owe me a ride?" she said breathily, rewarded by the darkening of his eyes. Her hand ran up his shaft, thumb circling the leaking head, and Cullen bucked helplessly in her grip.

"Are you sure you're real?" he gasped, and she grinned as she wriggled free of her smalls.

"You be the judge." She sank down, letting him fill her, revelling in the soft burn as she adjusted to his girth. She rolled her hips - oh - yes - more - and before too long the grin was Cullen's, thrusting up hard to meet her. He propped himself up on an elbow and took her rosy nipples into his mouth one by one, stubble scratching at her chest.

"I love you," he whispered between kisses. Closer, closer, he chanted her name like a prayer and her legs began to shake, molten pleasure flooding her entire body. They peaked as one, Cullen burying his face in her neck with a wordless cry.

"Bed," she breathed when she could speak again, and he kissed her, languid and warm.

"Come," he said as he hauled her up onto the mattress, curling his body around hers. "You deserve rest."

He dragged the blankets up and over them, and they rested.

It was hard to say how much later she awoke. Outside the clouds had given way to a flurry of snow, and the smell of cooking permeated the cottage.

"I raided the saddlebags," Cullen explained placing two bowls on the table. "I wasn't sure if the parsnips were meant for us or the horses. But it's…stew, I suppose."

She wrapped herself in a blanket and padded barefoot to his side, offering her face up for a kiss.

"I had a dream like this just after Haven," she told him. "It turned out to be a desire demon. Can I be certain this is really happening?"

He chuckled. "If I were you I'd suspend judgement until after you've tried my cooking."

Juliet took a chair and scooped up an experimental spoonful.

"Worthy of a desire demon?" Cullen asked.

"It's…um…"

"Terrible?"
"No, that's not it. It's very Ferelden."

"Oh dear."

"No, it's -" She chewed on another overcooked mouthful. "Mmm."

"Stop, I beg you. There's bread left from lunch. Cheese. Preserves. Wine!" He piled foodstuffs onto the table with increasing desperation. "I don't want to explain to Josephine that I killed the Inquisitor with Ferelden cooking!"

"Hmph." She choked down a final soggy lump. "Not a desire demon…despair, perhaps?"

"Too cruel!" he cried in mock affront. "Besides, everyone knows despair tastes like Orlesian ham."

"True enough." She held out a hand. "Wine, did you say?" Swigging straight from the bottle, she swished the smooth red liquid around in her mouth. Cullen watched with an eyebrow raised.

"You could at least pretend not to rinse," he grumbled. "I'm telling Dorian that you used the Inquisition's finest vintage as mouthwash."

"Cook him a stew first," she suggested.

"Impudent wench." He pulled her into his lap and squeezed her breathless, and she felt lighter than she had in weeks.

Darkness hid the swirling snow. Hours went by in which they drank, and talked, and didn't talk.

"Samson said you did some good," she told him with her cheek resting on his bare chest. "You stopped the raids."

"During sleeping hours," he clarified. "They were completely arbitrary. Nothing more than a bullying tactic. And giving templars an excuse to be in the mages' quarters at all hours…it didn't take a sharp mind to see how the system could be abused."

"Meredith didn't fight you?"

"Apprentices were falling asleep at their lessons. I pointed out that a tired mage is a weak mage, and a weak mage…" He cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Anyway, we already had a Harrowing failure rate far above any other circle. It dropped…a little."

"Hawke told me something of what she found beneath the city." She shuddered. "So much blood spilled…it must be like living in the Aeonar."

"Blood spilled on top of blood. I can't fathom what Varric sees in the place; I'd happily see it sink into the sea."

"The greatest sin in Varric's eyes is to be boring."

"Kirkwall certainly isn't that." She felt his deep intake of breath, gearing up to say something uncomfortable. "Stopping the raids…I don't mean to imply that the abuses stopped. It was an obstacle, nothing more. And I wasn't…I wasn't unaware. I could have tried to do more."

She shifted to meet his eyes. "What would you do now?"

"Well, I…whatever I had to," he said. "Is that enough?"
"Enough for me." She tugged at his arm until he rolled on top of her. "My hands aren't so clean. I don't know if every person I've killed with my own hands deserved to die. I sentenced every soul on board the dreadnought to death, to save a handful of our own. If I hadn't seen the future, I don't know if I could keep sending our people out to die for our cause." Flat against his chest, her palm flickered faintly green. "If you can live with my choices, I can live with yours."

"I'd follow you into the Void," he said hoarsely, but she shook her head.

"No. What did I just say? I need to be questioned. I need my choices examined. I'm not Andraste to be followed blindly. You're my advisor, not my worshipper." The words echoed at the back of her mind. **What if you wake up to find that the future you shaped is worse than what was?**

"I hear what you are saying," Cullen said with a smirk. He suckled gently at her neck, the spot that never failed to make her insides squirm. "But do you think..." Hands slid down to her sides, lightly grasping her hips. "That I could worship just some parts of you?" Lips on her belly, making her laugh in ticklish delight. "Just a bit? Hmm?"

*You're terrible,* she meant to say, but she found herself quite unable to speak.

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Josephine met them in the courtyard, board in hand. "Ah, Inquisitor! I am sorry to ambush you, but several urgent matters require your attention." She beamed at Cullen. "I trust you had a pleasant ride?"

"Indeed we did, thank you Josie." Juliet risked a sideways glance at Cullen; he was impressively composed. "Once this is all over, perhaps we can do it again some time."

He inclined his head, the very picture of professionalism. "Just say the word, Inquisitor," he said with the hint of a smile, "and I am at your service."

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*Cullen,*

*I was glad to receive your last letter. You sound happy. It's been - never mind. I just hope you are well. Which reminds me...*  

*Juliet? Not Inquisitor? Not Her Worship, the Herald of Andraste? Your last letter was far too short.*

*Love,*  

*Mia*
Mia,

I will write you a longer letter when there's time. Stop prying.

Cullen
"Are you keeping a journal?"

Solona glanced up at Wynne, pushing stray hair away from her eyes. "Not exactly. Well, sort of, but…" She showed the mage the page she was working on, neat glyphs and diagrams, tiny annotations scattered around them like branching cobwebs. "The arcane warrior memories," she said by way of explanation. "There are things I’d never come across in the Circle; I thought I should record them. In case…it would be wrong to let them be lost."

"What are you using to write?" Wynne settled down next to her, demurely resettling her robes over her ankles. "Is it charcoal?"

"This?" She passed her the small grey rod, freshly sharpened with a lick of flame. "It's some kind of mineral, I think. Stone will give it up, if you ask nicely."

"That's a strange way of putting it." Wynne's white brows shot up. "Unless - you didn't get this from Shale, did you?"

"No," she said, laughing. "Look." Her hand hovered over the rock on which they sat, and tiny grey flecks began to emerge as if drawn by a magnet. A clench of her hand and they coalesced; released, a perfect cylinder of carbon fell to the ground with a dull tap.

"How fascinating!" Wynne examined the original. "Graphite, I believe. I've seen it used in lightning staves, but it would never have occurred to me that you could write with it."

"It needs a little encouragement to bind to the vellum, but you get the hang of it." Solona shrugged. "I can show you in a moment. I just need to finish this, while it's clear in my mind. Spirit blades."

With a few deft strokes she drew a picture, rudimentary but somehow perfectly illustrative of a sword conjured from pure magic.

"I didn't know you were so adept at drawing."

"I wasn't." It had been awkward to begin with, but now her hand seemed almost to move of its own accord. "It's an odd thing, carrying someone else's memories in your head. I don't suppose I need to tell you that."

"It's not exactly the same, but yes. It certainly takes some adjustment."

"Can I ask…when you first came across your spirit of Faith, how long did it take you to know that it didn't mean you harm? That it wasn't, you know, a demon?"

"I felt from the beginning that its intentions were good," Wynne answered with a smile of fond remembrance. "I was a child, after all. I hadn't been taught to fear yet. Why do you ask? Are you afraid the arcane warrior may not be what it seems?"

"No. Those are just memories now. The warrior is at rest." Unsure, she fidgeted with the end of her braid; but who would understand, if not Wynne? "A spirit found me in the Fade."

Wynne looked briefly troubled. "What does it want?"

"Nothing, really. It shows me things. Memories. It doesn't ask for anything. At least," she amended, "it does ask questions, but only because I told it not to go into my head."
Wynne's frown deepened. "That does sound…"

"Oh! I don't mean it's trying to possess me. It just tries to understand things. It's…childlike, in a lot of ways."

"That is not unusual. All spirits mine our thoughts."

"I know that's how the landscape of the Fade is created; it's just strange to have words plucked from your head and spoken back to you." She felt suddenly guilty. Her friend, for that's how she had begun to think of it, had been trying to communicate in the only way it knew. "I should think of it as a cultural difference, I suppose."

"What does this spirit embody?"

"Kindness? No, not that…more like care."

"Compassion." Wynne nodded sagely. "I cannot see that it would be dangerous to keep up your association. That is what you wish to do, isn't it?"

"I do."

"Well then. You know I trust your judgement." She rose with a grace that belied her age. "Perhaps we will see your work in the Circle library someday."

"I'll have to hide some dirty bits in there for the apprentices."

"Just the apprentices?"

Solona laughed. "Thank you, Wynne."

She returned to her scribbling, finding herself wondering if the summoning of spirit objects might hold uses beyond blades. Here was where possession might have an advantage over holding another's memories. Memory was a twisty, fluid thing: it could not be interrogated, only prompted and coaxed from the hidden chambers of her mind. For now it was enough to fill several pages on various methods of barrier construction, while the light around her faded to the point where she had to conjure a wisp.

"You look stuck." Alistair deposited a tin cup of stew on the ground by her foot, and she was jolted back to the present.

"There's a word…I don't know how to translate it into Common."

"From…?"

"Ancient elvhen."

"Oh, of course. Obviously ancient elvhen." He took a seat next to her, stretching his long legs towards the fire. "Ack! Zevran's put some terrible spice in the stew again."

"It's just pepper."

"It's deviant, that's what it is. And these greens!" He pulled a face. "They're green."

"Ha." She set the journal aside to focus on dinner.

"You've got a smudge." He licked his finger and rubbed at her cheek, a quirk to his mouth that
made her chest tighten.

"Thanks." I love you, she wanted to say, but it caught in her throat. Instead she leaned in to his touch, and saw with the softening of his eyes that the same message was conveyed.

"Are you alright with going back to Redcliffe?"

"Me?" she said, surprised at the sudden shift in topic. "Why should I mind? Aside from the fact that Eamon disapproves of me."

"He doesn't." Alistair's gaze was far away now, somewhere on the other side of the leaping flames. The campfire drew him in lines of flickering bronze and shadow.

"Please, Alistair. I know he does."

"No." He looked back to her, pained. "He disapproves of us."

The words spilled out before she could bite them back. "And you don't?"

"Don't say that." Alistair could hide his feelings in jests and mummerly all he wanted, but genuine hurt showed in every line of his face. "You know I didn't mean...I was just trying to do the right thing."

"And did you?" Her throat felt thick; tears threatened, and Maker, why was she so weak? "Now isn't the time to talk about this."

"You've obviously got something you want to say."

"No." She coughed as a gust of wind blew smoke in their direction, and the tears came anyway. "Not now."

"Then when? It's not as though we have all the time in the world." She saw his throat convulse as he swallowed, hard. "Before the battle, I mean."

"All the more reason not to spend it fighting."

"Is that what it has to be?"

"Not here," she insisted quietly. "Later."

He gave an audible sigh, but didn't press the point. They both knew later was a lie, the same as it had been since Denerim when the wound was first opened.

There was a strange new dynamic between them. Conversation was stilted, all jokes and forced lightness. Throughout the day she would feel the pressure of his eyes upon her, and when chance allowed the brush of his hand on hers, whispered affirmations of love in her ear that all fell short of mending her hurt.

Then in the dark of the tent and waking in the grey mornings they would fall at each other, foreplay all but abandoned in their rush to join his body to hers. She would cling desperately to his shoulders as he drove into her, chasing down and capturing each of her breathy cries with his mouth.

As the end seemed near, inevitably he would change. His hips would slow; sorrow would flicker
across his face as he looked down at her. That was when he would turn her onto her belly and ease back inside her, fucking her slowly and with infinite tenderness. His hands would stroke and squeeze, his lips would work gently at her neck, and he would take her to the edge again and again. Only when she was floating in a haze of bliss and trembling limbs would he entwine his hands with hers and with a few sure, deep thrusts, bring them both to a shuddering finish.

It ached to feel the wall between them, even as they were physically as close as ever. It burned to have his skin pressed to hers and be afraid to look too long in his eyes, for fear she might crack and let her pain spill forth.

She stored it all away, hoarding scraps of love for the coming winter.

All around was desolation. The earth was cracked and parched, even the skies empty of life. The only sound to be heard was a mournful wind, and the distant clank of metal.

Distant? No. With each heartbeat the sound grew closer, until the heat-blurred horizon took form as a wave of darkspawn swarming over the ruined land.

They were like no darkspawn she had ever seen. The creatures she had fought were misshapen, reeking nightmares made flesh. These creatures were somehow worse: taller, broader, their limbs elongated and sharpened teeth prominent. It was, she thought with a roiling stomach, as if darkspawn had been poorly taxidermied and set into oddly smooth motion. As if someone had imagined darkspawn from a badly written description, and brought them to life…

Oh.

"Are you here?" she called softly. "Spirit?"

"I'm here." It flickered into being, fluttering like a person who didn't know what to do with their hands, and was unlucky enough to have a body entirely made of hands.

"Did you make those?"

"You seem unsure of your worth," said the fidgeting spirit. "I wanted to remind you. Does it help?"

"Honestly?" She looked at the approaching horde with a shudder. "No. Darkspawn are awful in real life, but this is a nightmare. Literally."

"A nightmare?"

"Yes. A bad dream."

"Oh." The spirit drooped, and the mutant horrors vanished from the landscape. In their place trees sprouted; streams sprang from the earth and greenery blossomed over the parched terrain. "I didn't mean to make it bad."

"I know. This is better," she reassured it, smiling as she wriggled her bare toes in the grass. "This is what we mean to save."

Light swirled happily around her. "Do you feel worthy now?"
What a question. There was little point in pretending, with a being that knew your thoughts better than you yourself did. Solona sank to the - oddly spongy - ground and drew her knees to her chin. "I feel necessary; I don't know if that's the same thing."

"He thinks you're worth everything. He would throw away a kingdom for you if he thought that was what you wanted." It settled in a posture that mimicked her own, beams of light folding into a loose pile. "I'm sorry. I made it hurt again...it wasn't supposed to hurt."

"No, I'm sorry." What might have been the suggestion of a butterfly floated past, wings rigid like a soaring bird's. "It should help. People are...complicated." She remembered her conversation with Wynne. "Would you say you're a spirit of compassion?"

"Compassion?"

"It's..." She sighed. "You can read my mind if you like."

"I have been," it confessed. "I don't really know how to stop. Compassion...yes. Yes, I think I am!" A waver ran through the spirit; it seemed to solidify. Still glowing, but with the hint of substance beneath. "You helped!"

"Did I?" She laughed and dipped her toes in the water that flowed past, neither cold nor warm. "I'm glad."

"You help," Compassion said earnestly. "You make things better."

"I'm not so sure any more. Before the Landsmeet it was clearer. I shouldn't be making decisions for all Ferelden. What do I know about anything?" She appealed to the spirit, to the leaden sky, to the distant Black City in which sat the Maker with his fingers in his ears. "A year ago I'd never left the Tower. Why am I shaping kingdoms? That's not my place."

Compassion flickered in mute distress.

"Don't be upset," she begged. "I shouldn't burden you with my problems, of all..." People? "I'll be fine. This will be over soon. Maker, I'm tired of decisions."

Over, and if she survived...should she journey to Weisshaupt? Wait for the Wardens to find her? Riordan would know; she would let him take charge. And then -

"The Deep Roads. Winding, wending, windowless. And without him, Andra..." She shook her head ruefully. "I did say you could read my mind, didn't I?"

"You don't want to live in the lightless tunnels. You don't want the stench and filth of the darkspawn, the weight of stone over your head. You don't want to live knowing that sunlight is weeks away."

Before she could respond, the sky began to darken and thicken, somehow; the trees became withered and bare, and the streams ran black over the land like blighted veins. A shriek split the still air.

"That isn't me," the spirit whispered, quivering. "I didn't make this."

Solona tamped down the acid fear rising in her throat. "I know. It's here for me."
"The archdemon. Reaving, rending, mad. Is it truly a demon?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It was a god, but the Chantry would say there is only one true god. Does that make the rest of them demons?" Decayed leather wings beat in the distance; now was not the time to debate theology. "You should go."

"I will," said the spirit, "and so should you."

She fell violently from sleep, her legs jerking. Behind her Alistair slumbered fitfully. He muttered and twitched, his arms tightening around her waist.

"Alistair," she murmured. "Alistair". She squeezed his wrist, and he awoke with a grunt.

"What? Oh." She felt him shake his head. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I heard it too." Outside the grey of dawn was advancing; out of habit she twisted in his arms, seeking his lips with hers. She stopped in confusion when he pulled away. "Is something wrong?"

There was a moment of quiet in which she wished she could see his face. "Did I break us?" she heard him ask at last.

"Why would you think we're broken?"

"You don't look at me any more."

"I'm looking at you now."

"That doesn't count," he said gently. "It's dark."

Solona raised a hand, wisp-light floating at her fingertips. There he was, bronze-gold and beautiful, wisps reflecting in eyes the colour of tree-sap. It hurt to see him; it hurt worse to have him see her, to think that the open wound in her soul might be visible in her face. The light winked out.

"Right. Am I really that ugly? I mean I suspected as much, but it's nice to have it confirmed."

"Don't be stupid."

"Ugly and stupid? Thanks, Morrigan."

"Stop it, Alistair." This time it was she who drew away, and he chased her.

"I'm sorry." He drew her into his arms, placing a hard kiss on her forehead. "I made a mess of things. I know I did."

She let her face rest in the crook of his neck, willing her voice to steadiness. "You were right."

"No." His voice turned hard. "Bring the lights back."

Reluctantly she recalled the wisps, letting them float around the tent ceiling. His face was shadowed, but she clearly saw his bold nose, his furrowed brow.

"I was wrong," he said. "I hurt you for no reason. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, I promise. Let me explain -"
"I will," she promised. "But first -"

"I need to say this, Solona. Or I'll forget what I meant to say, or lose my nerve, or things will happen and it will be too late." He laid a hand on her cheek. "I panicked. I was king, and I never expected to be, and I had no idea how to be or what to do…I love you, Solona. So much it hurts."

"I know," she replied hoarsely. "I mean, I feel the same."

"I couldn't bear to be parted from you -"

"But you will. You'll be in Denerim, and I'll be…" Once she began shaking, it seemed she couldn't stop.

"Not all the time."

"I couldn't. I couldn't go down there without knowing I'd see you again."

"I shouldn't have asked you to."

"But you were right, Alistair. You should be allowed to move on -"

"Hush," he said. "There's no moving on from you."

"It doesn't make sense." She found her arms wrapped around his neck, her chest pressed hard against his. "It never made sense you could want me. And then when you stopped, suddenly it did."

"I never stopped." Alistair moved to brace himself over her, voice shaking with conviction. "To think you might feel unworthy of me - you're the strongest, wisest, bravest, most beautiful -"

"I'm a mage," she interrupted. "Even if the rest was true. Even if I weren't barren, I couldn't give you a proper heir."

"Proper? I'm not a proper heir. And I'm barren to boot."

"It's not the same thing."

"Why?"

"You know why!" Frustrated as she was, it was hard to ignore the solid presence of him above her. "Everything you said was true."

Alistair rested his forehead against hers. "You're wrong. I said it would be easier to stop now. It wouldn't."

"I was selfish. I should have let you go when you wanted."

"It wasn't what I wanted," he said with feeling. "Why is it easier for you to doubt everything I've said over months than to forget one moment of stupidity? And don't tell me you're selfish. You could have convinced me not to be king with a word. A look. You are the least selfish person I've ever known."

"I should have let you go."

"You keep telling me I can make my own decisions," he said. "I choose you."
A dreadful weight lifted from her chest. "You'll regret it."

"Then let me regret it." At last his lips met hers, meltingly sweet, and she rose into his embrace.

"We'll be parted," she murmured when they finally broke apart. "For ages, if not forever."

"I don't care, if I can still have you." When she tried to protest he kissed her soundly. "I don't care," he repeated. "I can bear anything if I have hope that I'll see you again some day."

"Hope, then." She traced his jawline with trembling fingers. "Is it wrong to indulge it?"

"What more do we have?" Alistair ran his hands up her sides, and pressed his lips to her neck; hope, perhaps, was the least of their sins.

Maker, but she loved him.

She should go and talk to him. His room was only two doors from her own; Morrigan waited, no doubt impatiently, for her answer.

*If I ask him, he'll do it.*

Was it less than a day since they'd arrived back in Redcliffe? It seemed she'd had her world turned upside down so many times in that short period. One of them must die. That was the best outcome possible, if all else succeeded and the archdemon was slain. To end the Blight, a Warden must die.

And then.

Solona trusted Morrigan. It hadn't always been so, and it had taken perhaps even longer before the witch trusted her, seeming so surprised by any kindness that she reverted immediately to suspicion. If Morrigan said that a death could be avoided, Solona believed that she thought it to be true. Yet Flemeth's hand was behind this, steering their movements even from beyond the Veil. It was surprising that Morrigan would trust her mother's motives so readily.

"Warden." She turned to see Eamon, shadowed in the dim hallway.

"Arl." It wasn't like her to be petty but she had to admit to some small satisfaction when he paused, flummoxed at being addressed by only his title. "How may I help you?"

"I wondered if you were lost," he ventured. "It is an old castle, and large; I understand it's easy to lose one's bearings."

"That's very kind of you, but I'm not lost. I was on my way to speak to Alistair."

"Yet you didn't seem to be moving."

She smiled sweetly. "No. You have such lovely tapestries, and I don't know when I'll get another chance to admire them."

"Indeed." His eyes glittered. "I cannot imagine you will have much cause to return to Redcliffe once your business is concluded."
"That is true," she said mildly, "with my duty to the Wardens, and Alistair in Denerim…"

"Warden…Amell. I do not know the nature of your relationship with my nephew -"

"Do you not?" She drew herself up to her full height, aware that it left her half a head shorter than the Arl. "Allow me to speak plainly, Arl Eamon. Alistair is not your nephew. You were his guardian, for a time, and in that you failed. You have not earned the right to dictate how he chooses to live his life."

He was unused to being spoken to in this manner, that much was clear from the huff of outrage that escaped his nostrils. "You dare - and you have earned this right, I suppose?"

"I would never try to influence Alistair, save by encouraging him to look out for his own interests and believe in his own abilities. I have no desire to create a puppet, even if I had so little respect for his wishes."

"Upstart mage," he snapped. "You disgrace him. Do you have so little regard -"

"Yes, I am a mage, just as your son is a mage." She could not say which she found more surprising: her calm, or her cruelty. "It's not such a bad life. Everyone is treated equally. Nobody sleeps in the kennels."

Eamon seemed to shrink. "You don't understand…"

"I don't pretend to understand. I don't know why you didn't ship him off to the Chantry at birth if you couldn't care for him. I don't know what guarantees you gave his father, or if he ever knew how completely you'd abused his trust. I'd rather not understand."

"I was only trying to save my marriage," he pleaded.

"Did you ever consider telling her the truth?" She shook her head. "No, you chose to marry someone you couldn't even treat as an equal, and you were too much of a coward to stand up to her. So you sold him into addiction and servitude. Don't presume to lecture me."

Cowled, the Arl shrank back into the shadows. "I apologise for disturbing you, Warden Amell. I will leave you in peace."

Perhaps it should have felt like a victory; then again, maybe some things were better left unsaid. Either way she couldn't complete the walk to Alistair's room, couldn't stomach trying to sway him one way or the other.

Behind lay Morrigan and her expectations. Ahead lay Alistair, blessedly unaware of the dark bargain offered them. Either way she was trapped.

"You return alone." Morrigan's yellow eyes narrowed. "What is it to be? Has a decision been reached?"

Solona steeled herself. "I can't, Morrigan. I'm sorry."

"I do not understand. I know you - you are not so weak-willed as to flinch from what must be done."

"I wish I were." She perched on the edge of her bed. "It would be easy to go in there and tell him
"We could be saved."

"Why not do it then?" Morrigan asked, her impatience barely concealed. "Tis the truth, after all."

"How do you know?"

"How?" She let out an exasperated sigh. "Did I not explain myself plainly? Neither of you need die. This is not the time for jealousy, Solona."

"Please, Morrigan. I'm not so petty that I'd prefer death to...what you propose." It was difficult to argue with her friend and not feel somehow lesser: less self-assured, less worldly, less open-minded, less free. "I just have doubts. You have to understand: my job is to stop the archdemon, and you propose saving it. I've spent my life under suspicion of consorting with demons and you ask me to preserve one that threatens all of Thedas."

"Ridiculous superstition," Morrigan snorted.

"You well know demons are more than superstition. We've fought hundreds of them."

"The old god."

"Is what?" she asked. "Can you tell me with certainty that it's not a demon? Can you tell me why it was buried underground in the first place?"

"As I said, 'tis not the archdemon I seek to preserve."

"I know. What you haven't told me is how you can be sure what will survive, and what will be lost." She gripped the edge of the bed, dropping her voice to a furious whisper. "Have you heard the archdemon, Morrigan? Has it been inside your head?"

"I...no."

"So it hasn't invaded your dreams. Breathed its foul stench in your face and described the sound that your bones would make crunching between its jaws. Showed you visions of the spray of your blood in its mouth and the taste of your flesh?"

For an instant Morrigan faltered. "You talk of the archdemon. I speak of preserving the past."

"Wardens are sent mad by the taint," Solona told her. "We're driven underground to destroy ourselves in pursuit of the darkspawn. What's madness if not an illness of the soul? Can you be certain that you won't preserve that corruption? Has it ever been done before?"

Morrigan scowled. "I thought you better than this. Than some...cowardly Circle mage, bound to folklore. Can you not go beyond their doctrine?"

"Doctrine? I'm trying to understand, Morrigan, and you're asking me to swap one unquestioning belief for another." She rubbed at her eyes, suddenly wearied beyond measure. "I'm not doubting your motives. I don't believe you'd lie to me: you never have before. But what you're offering...one life if you're right. How many if you're wrong? If something we do lets the archdemon live, and the Blight continues...I'm sorry, I can't. I can't."

The witch stared into the fireplace, her bare shoulders hunched. Had it been Leliana she might have approached her, given her a hug, but that wasn't Morrigan. To try would be to disrespect everything she was.
No, this might be the end; Morrigan needed something from her that she could never consent to give.

"Morrigan…"

"I will not stand by and watch you waste this opportunity!" Her voice was filled with bitter sorrow. "Die, if you feel it is worthwhile. I care not."

"I know you don't mean that."

Morrigan turned, drawing her hood up around her face too late to hide the pain that was written there. "Farewell, my friend," she said. "I do what I must now, and so shall you."

Solona stood. "Thank you, Morrigan. For everything."

The witch paused halfway to the door, but did not turn back. A dip of her head was all the acknowledgement she gave her friend's words; that, and the infinitesimal tremble of her shoulders. She was gone.

The fire popped and crackled. Solona sank to the rug and stared numbly into the flames. Maker, turn back to me now. Tell me I made the right choice. Tell me I haven't damned us without cause.

Leliana could see the Maker's hand in the smallest things; it didn't shield her from bad decisions, or treachery. It didn't relieve her of pain or even doubt. But it must be better than this, this void. She wished the Maker spoke to her from these flames, even if she couldn't understand his message. The Chant eluded her.

"True tests never end."

Behind her the open door creaked, too drawn-out to be accidental. "What was that, my Warden?"

She didn't need to turn to see Zevran's lithe form silhouetted in the doorway. "Nothing. Just something I was told once."

"Did you see a dog pass, just now?"

"Dog's downstairs. In the kitchen, if I know him."

"That is not the dog of which I speak."

"Come in, Zevran." She patted the empty stretch of rug beside her. "How much did you hear?"

"Ah." He padded silently to her side and sat, folding his legs beneath him. "More than was meant for my ears, I suspect. Are you angry?"

"At an assassin, for eavesdropping? You silly boy."

"I am, yes." Zevran shook his head slowly. "May I tell you a story about a silly boy?"

"Why not? I have time."

He glanced sharply at her, then back to the fire. "If you say so, my dear. My story concerns an orphan boy in Antiva City, and a whorehouse madam. The madam kept little birds in a silver cage; how they twittered and flapped, longing to fly beyond the confines of those silver bars. It saddened the boy to watch them; so, one day when he thought nobody was looking, he set them free."
"The madam was furious, of course. She found the culprit, because nothing remains hidden in a whorehouse in Antiva City. She had the boy thrashed. He fancied himself brave, and good, so he did not cry."

"'Stupid boy,' the madam said. 'Do you think you saved those birds? A cage is all they know. The lucky ones might be caught and put back in a cage; the rest will die within the week.'"

Solona's mouth set in a grim line. "Are you sure you didn't mean that story for Shale? She'd enjoy it more."

"For once, enjoyment is not the purpose."

"Is that how you see me?" She couldn't help but bristle at the implication. "A bird that can't live outside its cage?"

"Far from it, my beauty. But I wonder sometimes if that is not how you see yourself."

Her throat closed over, her voice emerging small and broken. "I had no choice. You see that, don't you?"

"Perhaps so. But there are choices left to make, are there not?"

"Riordan is the senior Warden. If anyone has a chance to take down the archdemon, he does." The thought was uncomfortable, but not impossible.

"He has been injured. And as always, you underestimate your own abilities. And Alistair's."

"It can't be Alistair. I won't let that happen."

"You know he will feel the same about you."

"He's wrong." She drew her knees up to her chin. "I'm nothing. He's the king. The last of his line."

"A line that dies with him, no? The magical blood of royalty. A born leader: yet he defers to you."

"That was true in the beginning. He just needed confidence."

"Which you gave him. Will it last if you are gone?"

"It will have to. I'll be gone either way. He can do this on his own, Zevran. I believe in him."

"You are never wrong when it comes to other people, mi amora."

"Not even you?"

"That depends." He smiled, all shadows and sharp edges. "You were not wrong to move on; I gave you precious little reason to stay. I will let you judge if you should have let me close to you at all."

"I don't regret us, Zevran." She placed her hand over his. "I regret the way it ended."

"And I my part in it. You have been a true friend, Solona. I am glad you found happiness, however fleeting."

Wordless, she squeezed his fingers.

Zevran exhaled slowly through his nose. "You understand that if it comes down to the two of you,
Alistair will wish to make the sacrifice."

"I won't let that happen."

"How, my Warden? Would you keep him from the final battle?"

"If I tell him to stay at the city gates he will. But if both Riordan and I fall, and the archdemon still lives…it would be foolish for the last Grey Warden in Ferelden to be miles away. No," she decided. "I'll have to find another way."

He looked at her without judgement. "Deception?"

"If that's what it takes to save his life, then yes. Without question. He cannot know, Zevran."

The elf cocked an eyebrow. "I would not give up your secrets."

"Any of it." She twisted to take both his hands in hers. "Morrigan's offer…if we win, if he makes it through alive, he must never know. Promise me."

His lips twisted in sorrow, Zevran drew her into a careful embrace. "I am sorry you must carry this burden, mi amora. I will take this knowledge to my grave if that is what you wish of me."

"Thank you." She fought back tears: there was too little time left to spend even a moment crying.

"I will leave you." A glancing kiss to her forehead, and he stood to go. "You will wish to see Alistair."

"In a moment. I have some writing to do." She reached in a pocket for her journal; a torn page would do well enough for a letter.

"Good night then, little Warden," he said with a bow. "I shall see you in the morning. Perhaps our last."

She smiled up at him hopefully. "We save the world tomorrow."

"How could we fail?" he answered, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. "We are ridiculously awesome, after all."

"We're certainly ridiculous." He turned to leave. "Zevran?"

"Amora?"

Briefly she wondered what this new nickname meant; perhaps one day she could ask him. "The boy in your story was good. And brave."

Zevran's eyes crinkled, and he nodded at her journal. "As was the girl in yours."

She laughed and smoothed a thumb over the embossed cover. When she looked up again, the doorway was empty. "Let's hope that's enough," she whispered.