Of Wardens and Pariahs

by queen_scribbles

Summary

When Duncan recruits both Trinne Amell and Harvey Cousland to the Wardens, they have to figure out how to get along before they can figure out how to save the world.

Notes

Cross-posting from deviantArt (finally) because a lot of work has gone into this fic, from both me and Alex (errantgoat on tumblr, she doesn't have an AO3), and now that I'm on AO3, we decided to expand the potential audience. I will warn this was started in 2012, so the early chapters are a little rough. Not awful, just... also not great. It gets better.
"Keep your wits about you, mage. True tests never end..."

"Thank you! I knew you'd stand by me..."

"The initiate conspiring with the blood mage..."

"No! I won't let you touch her!"

"Stay away from me, blood mage!"

Trinne jolted awake from the intensity of the dream, immediately fighting the overwhelming urge to cry. Once tonight was plenty, she scolded herself, feeling Duncan's sympathetic yet still detached gaze on her back even as she jammed the heel of one hand against her eyes to prevent the threatening tears. I refuse to cry myself to sleep twice in the same night over this. It's not worth it... She forced herself to curl up ignore the small voice insisting He is, and try to get back to sleep sans tears. It wasn't easy, with the not even week-old memories of betrayal so deep it stole her breath flitting just below the surface.

"I trusted you..." she couldn't resist whispering to the darkness that surrounded their campsite.

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It was much easier to bury the memory of her last day at the Circle once the sun--and her companion-rose, and she could distract herself by peppering Duncan with every Warden-related question that crossed her mind.

The Warden was tolerant of Trinne's chatter, and she suspected her knew there was more to this than simply satisfying an insatiable love of history.

"So, where are we going again?" the mage asked, fiddling impatiently with the sleeve of her robe.

"Highever," Duncan replied patiently. "There is a knight in the Couslands' service that I may conscript as well before we head for Ostagar."

"What's his name?" Her fingers left her sleeve and wandered upwards to twirl a lock of flyaway black hair.

"Ser Roland Gilmore. From what I hear, he is quite a worthy young man, and a skilled warrior as well."

"He'd have to be, right? The Wardens only recruit the best." Trinne tugged on the lock of hair she was twisting, looking at Duncan rather than the road under her feet.

He chuckled. "True. It takes someone... special to truly succeed as a Warden."

"Special like me?" Trinne rolled her eyes. "Too loyal or naive or plain ol' dumb to tell my best friend was lying to me?"

Duncan shook his head. "Someone who would risk everything to help a friend in need, as I said. And stand by that decision despite the risk."
Trinne snorted at the reminder of her petulant defiance. "No one deserves to be made Tranquil. No one. I don't care if he did lie to me, Jowan's my best friend and I couldn't just stand by and let them do that to him."

Duncan didn't comment on either her hot tone or her use of present tense. "And that attitude is precisely why I recruited you. Now, you see the castle there?" He pointed to a distant building that sprawled across a rather large hill. "That is Castle Cousland. We will most likely arrive there early in the afternoon. I would request that you keep in mind you represent the Wardens as a whole with your conduct and act with appropriate decorum."

Trinne laughed. "Behave myself, in other words. I will, I promise. I know how to act around nobility," she assured Duncan. "I won't tarnish your reputation." That's assuming I can remember Mum's lectures on etiquette after all this time...

One of the swarthy man's eyebrows quirked ever so slightly, but he didn't press the matter. "Very well." The ensuing silence stretched on as the Warden was completely comfortable with it and the mage was too busy fighting memories of the two worst days of her life; one horribly distant and the other achingly recent.

"Oh, by the way..." she finally spoke up, running one hand through her hair, "I never properly thanked you for rescuing me from that... prison. Or the rather sticky situation. So, Duncan, a thousand thank yous for getting me out of the bloody tower, and a thousand more for the protection from Greagoir's wrath. I've known him long enough to know I'd've gotten my share and then some of whatever punishment he chose to dole out."

She'd been half-joking, but Duncan's eyes darkened and he shook his head. "The life of a Grey Warden is not an easy one, Trinne. You might want to wait a bit before you thank me."

"Oooh, scary..." Trinne rolled her eyes. "You fight monsters. Mages worry about demons and being made Tranquil. Whatever's involved in being a Warden, it can't possibly be worse than staying there would have been."

Duncan looked ready to further contradict her, but left his countering argument unvoiced. That almost scared Trinne more than if he'd said something; it was as if the veteran Warden was deciding to simply let her see for herself. Which meant maybe there was something to be worried about.

Maybe darkspawn are scarier than I thought... She kept her concerns to herself, though, and settled for trudging along next to the man in silence. She needed to save her breath for walking anyway.

>>X<<

Duncan's estimate had been right; the two of them reached the castle a couple hours after eating lunch. It was even bigger than Trinne had been expecting, and she had to admit she felt dwarfed by the high stone walls as they approached.

"Hail Grey Wardens, and well-met," the guard bowed in respect as he opened the gates for them. "The teyrn is in the main hall and will see you shortly."

"Well-met, ser, and thank you kindly." Duncan returned the man's greeting with a respectful bow of his own, arms crossed against his chest. Trinne was too busy gaping at the architecture to do the same, so Duncan simply took her elbow and guided her inside. "Wait, Wardens?" Trinne quirked an eyebrow at him and added an extra emphasis to the pluralization.

"You may only be a recruit as of yet, but the moment we left the Circle, you became a Grey Warden
in the eyes of the world," he explained, still guiding his protégée by the elbow.

"Oh, so that's why the reminder to behave myself?" Trinne muttered as she followed the senior Warden toward the hall.

"Yes." Duncan nodded. "I told you your behavior will reflect on the Grey Wardens as a whole." The two of the halted by one of the side doors to the main hall. "We wait here until shown in."

"Ooh, we get shown in? Look, I've spent the last thirteen years of my life in that bloody tower," she defended as amusement flickered across Duncan's face. "You might be used to being respected and not viewed with a sort of... guarded disdain, sometime bordering on hatred, but I'm not. Even the most decent of the templars is prepared to strike down a mage that might be an abomination." She thought of Cullen and his determination to "do as the Maker commanded". "I'm fairly sure the Maker never commanded the murder of an innocent for no reason other than fear," she'd shot back. That hadn't gone over well. "This whole respect thing is new to me."

He smiled. "I apologize. Your enthusiasm is simply... refreshing to a jaded veteran who is nearing the end of his time."

That remark piqued Trinne's curiosity like few things could, but she was forced to save any interrogation for later as the door swung open and a guard motioned for them to enter the main hall.

She was suddenly, almost painfully aware that she was about to meet bloody nobility, and despite her usual lack of care about her appearance, some of her mother's lessons had stuck too well to be entirely ignored, and the mage hastily smoothed the sunny yellow skirts of her robes and ran one hand through her vexatious waves of hair. It wasn't much, but it was the best she could do under the circumstances. She hoped Teyrn Cousland was an understanding man.

"Your Lordship, you didn't mention there would be Grey Wardens present." The comment came from a man who looked about the same age as the teyrn himself, clad in blue and purple silk but somehow still reminding Trinne of a weasel.

"Duncan has only just arrived," explained their host. "He's here to test one of my knights for recruitment to the order. Is there a problem?"

"Certainly not," the other noble replied, quickly collecting himself. "But a guest of this stature demands certain... protocols. I am at a disadvantage." He offered an oily and ingratiating smile to first Duncan and then Trinne. Having talked her way out of more corners than she could remember, the mage didn't buy his obsequious demeanor for a second. And she had to physically check herself from gagging when he continued, "And who is this lovely young companion you've brought with you?"

To keep herself from electrocuting or hexing a man who was quite clearly an honored guest--if not a personal friend of their host--Trinne pointedly ignored him, blocking out Duncan's brief explanation of his visit to the Circle. Instead, she--rather blatantly--stared at the only other person in the room who didn't appear to be a guard; a young man wearing leather armor and a worried expression that bordered on desperation.

What's got him all worked up? she wondered, raising an eyebrow. If the creepy noble in blue looked like a weasel, this man reminded her of a dog; green eyes seeming to silently beg the teyrn to release him from some horribly unpleasant duty. It wasn't a terribly impressive image.

"...I offer you a warm welcome, Trinne." Teyrn Cousland's use of her name jolted her attention back to the ongoing conversation just in time for her to offer a properly respectful bow to her host. The teyrn shot a meaningful look at the younger man she'd been sizing up.
Almost as if startled out of an internal reverie of his own, he crossed his arms against his chest and bowed. "I hope you like it in Highever, m'lady."

The part of her that was resigned to mages never holding titles warmed ever so slightly at that. "M'lord," she replied, more out of instinct than any other reason. He does have a nice voice.

"You'll see the Wardens' needs are met while your brother and I are away, won't you, my boy?" the teyrn said, still looking at the green-eyed young man.

Wait, that's his son? While not entirely sure who else she'd expected him to be, Trinne was still surprised by the relationship. They look nothing alike... though the same could be said for me and my mother, so I guess that doesn't really mean anything. It took an inordinate amount of work to keep her train of thought--not to mention surprise--hidden.

The younger Cousland sighed. "I still don't see why you need me to--"

"Harvey." The teyrn's tone reminded Trinne of Greagoir's Argue at Your Own Peril voice as he crossed his arms and fixed his son with a stern look. "We're done discussing this. Now, would you please go tell Fergus to lead the troops to Ostagar ahead of me?" He turned back to Duncan. "I hope your testing of Ser Gilmore goes well."

"As do I, my lord," the Warden replied. "Though, if I might be so bold, I believe your son would also be an excellent candidate."

The man shook his head emphatically, stepping forward to stand between Duncan and Harvey, who had paused halfway to the side door at the almost casual statement. "Honor though that may be, this is one of my sons we're talking about, and I've not so many children I'd gladly see them all off to war."

As if his father's dismissal of the notion wasn't enough, Harvey offered a small but still respectful bow to Duncan before adding, "Thank you for the offer, ser, but I'm truly not interested."

Trinne barely choked back a surprised snort. Not interested?! So are you scared or just dumb?

Duncan, however, took the dual rejection in stride. "Very well. We always need recruits, but I've no intention of forcing the issue. Though it seems a shame..."

Trinne bit the inside of her cheek--hard--to keep the myriad smart comments she could make from spilling out. You must know something about him I can't see...

"Now, pup, would you go find your brother as I asked?" Teyrn Cousland said to his son, a note of exasperation bleeding into his voice.

Harvey sighed and nodded. "As you wish." He seemed almost eager to leave the room, far as Trinne could tell, worrying some private problem in his mind before he'd even made it to the door.

"I wish I could stay to see how the testing goes," the teyrn remarked to Duncan as Trinne idly stared after his son. "But I suppose I'll know the result when you arrive at Ostagar, won't I?"

Duncan nodded. "That you will, Teyrn Cousland."

"Now, I have things to see to before my departure tomorrow, so I hope you won't think me rude if I take my leave?"

"Of course not," Duncan assured him.
"My thanks," the teyrn smiled, motioning for one of the guards stationed in the hall. "Show them to their rooms. Rendon, I believe you and I have details to discuss, do we not, old friend?"

The weasel-ly noble nodded. "That we do, m'lord."

"Come, we can talk in my study..." Their voices grew faint in the background as Trinne and Duncan followed the guard out of the room.

Trinne couldn't help herself; she outright stared at the architecture of the castle as they walked, barely listening to Duncan as he talked about how long they would be staying, how he would be busy with Ser Gilmore, could she keep herself occupied and out of trouble on her own, blah blah blah. This castle was amazing. Part of her awe, granted, was probably due to her thirteen years of living in the tower and seeing that and nothing else. But there was still no denying Castle Cousland was an impressive building.

"Here are your rooms, ser; m'lady." The guard's respectful announcement broke her chain of thought as Trinne was trying to figure the castle's age.

"Oh, thank you," she mumbled with an embarrassed smile, glancing at the door to her room. "Now, if I wanted to... walk around the castle, explore some, is there anywhere off-limits?"

"Just there, really," the guard replied, motioning further down the corridor. "Them's the teyrn's family's rooms."

Trinne nodded. "I understand." She could hear a child's voice, raised in excited inquiry, from down that way and briefly wondered whose child it was before dismissing it as none of her business.

"Trinne, I need to find Ser Gilmore," Duncan informed her.

"Alright." She nodded. "I'll manage on my own." Always have... "I really want to explore a little, maybe find the library."

Duncan chuckled. "Very well. At least I know where to look for you, should I need you for anything."

"That's always a good start point if I go missing," Trinne agreed with a laugh. She stepped into her room briefly, to lean her staff against the wall and drop her woefully limp pack on the bed. All it contained was a clean set of robes, a few personal things, and a small book on herbalism she'd talked Irving into letting her keep--everything in the world she called her own, in other words. Once she'd unburdened herself, the mage was off, tugging the door half-heartedly shut. When you grew up sharing a room with fifteen other kids, privacy was usually not a huge concern, so she didn't particularly care if it closed all the way.

Now, to try and find the library...

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She hadn't gone far before she practically ran into a slender blonde elf.

"Oh, a thousand apologies, my lady," the elf stammered, dropping a flustered but still elegant curtsy. Trinne shook her head. "No, that was entirely my fault," she laughed. "It's... this is my first time in a castle like this, and consequently I was paying more attention to the building than if I was about to run into anyone." She smiled at the elven girl, who was staring at her. "I'm Trinne. Who're you?"

"You're the... the mage who came with the Grey Warden?" Wide teal eyes went even wider at the knowledge and she dropped another curtsy. "My lady, it's an honor to meet you."
"I'm not used to being 'my lady'-ed," Trinne confessed sheepishly. "And you didn't tell me your name."

"I-Iona," the elf stammered, still staring as if the mage had sprouted an extra head. "I-I need to be going. I'm fetching something for my mistress and she'll be wondering what's keeping me."

"Oh, of course. I wouldn't want you to get in trouble or anything." The pieces clicked together as Trinne watched Iona scurry toward the bedroom directly across from her own; why the elf had stared at her so, why she'd seemed embarrassed. It was everywhere in the history books, in the culture--elves were servants out here, laborers. And that was if they were lucky enough to avoid spending their days as gutter-dwelling street rats. The world out here wasn't like the tower, where the "Curse" of magic made them all equal in the templars' eyes. And Trinne's memories from before the Circle were hazy at best; vague shadows that might have been elven servants fluttering alongside faint impressions of her sisters' giggles and her mother's smile.

As she continued walking, Trinne couldn't help but wonder if her view of elves was going to cause trouble out here. But that was maybe the one good thing about the Circle; she'd learned to like or hate a person based off who they were, not their race.

Her plan of following the hallway until it ran somewhere interesting was derailed when she reached a point where her hallway dumped into another one that went both right and left.

"Andraste's knickerweasels," she huffed, glancing both directions down this new hallway. After a few seconds' internal debate, she went left. She hadn't gone far when she noticed another hallway branching off to the left, and sheer curiosity--plus an aroma that made her think the kitchens were this way--had her following that instead.

"Damned rats..." someone muttered up ahead, and Trinne felt one of her eyebrows quirk upward when she saw it was Harvey.

What's he doing over here? I thought the teyrn told him to find his brother... Her eyebrow went even higher when she saw his leather armor was splattered with blood, presumably belonging to the rats he'd been cursing under his breath.

"I never would've thought noble spent their spare time playing in rat guts," she commented, adding a teasing note to her voice.

Harvey apparently missed it. "I don't know what sort of things they teach you in the Circle tower, m'lady," he began, turning to face her while also trying to get the mabari hound sitting next to him to stop licking the blood off his armor. "But real life tends to get you dirty sometime--Frida, stop."

The mabari let out an overjoyed bark as Harvey tried unsuccessfully to push her head away and redoubled her efforts.

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Well, you're no fun... Trinne rolled her eyes and shot back a frosty "You have no idea." before stomping off the way she'd come. "'Real life gets you dirty sometimes'," she mocked under her breath once she was out of Harvey's earshot. "Like I didn't know that... Stupid spoiled nobles and their stupid preconceptions. What does he think, that I can leave the tower whenever I damn well please? It doesn't bloody work that way, ser. Not at al--Whoa!" Her mumbled diatribe against the noble was interrupted as she collided with a man clad in chainmail. "Ow!" The complaint jumped out instinctively as she rubbed her now-tender nose.

"I'm terribly sorry, my lady," the knight apologized, steadying the mage with one hand as she overcompensated for the abrupt halt. "No permanent damage, I hope?"
Trinne blinked away the stars edging her vision and decided any bruises or other damage—permanent or not—could be overlooked for this man. Warm green eyes and slightly shaggy red hair were complemented nicely by a strong jaw and wide smile. "N-No, I'll be fine. I think," she amended, gingerly feeling her nose. "I'm Trinne, by the way."

"Ah, you must be the other Grey Warden recruit. A pleasure to meet you. Ser Roland Gilmore, at your service." He gave an abbreviated bow, and Trinne smiled. Duncan could say what he liked in warning, if this man was her fellow Warden all the dangers in Thedas would be swamp gunk, as far as she was concerned.

"Duncan was looking for you, Ser Gilmore," she informed the young knight as she returned his bow. "Something about beginning your testing immediately?"

He nodded. "That would make sense. I'm sure he wishes to delay here for as short a time as possible. But before I seek him out, were you on your way to anywhere in particular?"

"Well... I was sort of hoping to find the library?" Trinne confessed, clasping her hands together behind her back. "I got sort of... side-tracked and have no idea where I am, though."

"It's easy to get turned around in this castle when you don't know it well, trust me. Allow me to escort you, m'lady?" He held out his arm, ready for her to grasp.

"Oh, um, okay," Trinne mumbled, flustered and blushing like nobody's business as she rested one hand on his arm. "But, um, you can just call me Trinne. 'Specially if we're going to be Wardens together."

"Well, then, I insist you call me Rory." Ser Gilmore returned with a smile as they began walking. "Since we're going to be Wardens together."

Trinne giggled. "I think I can manage that, Rory," she replied, very much enjoying the way his name rolled off her tongue. The walk to the library was entirely too short, in her opinion, and it was far too soon Rory was sliding his arm free of her light grasp and indicating the library door.

"That's the room you want, m--Trinne," he told her. "I need to find Duncan, but I look forward to better making your acquaintance later."

She grinned at him. "The feeling is entirely mutual, Rory." She paused outside the door for a moment, watching the knight walk away, before entering the library with a smile plastered across her face. Not a bad first impression...
The Trouble with Mabari

What'd I say? Harvey frowned in confusion as he watched the very pissed off mage stomp away. He was trying to be polite, but obviously Trinne had still found his comment offensive somehow. Maybe she was having a bad day. Maybe with the distractions of what his father expected him to do, he'd said the wrong thing.

And with that, Harvey's mind was back on what he'd been intending to do before Gilmore--not to mention Frida--sidetracked him. Namely, talking his mother into staying at the castle instead of going off with Lady Landra. He did not want to be in charge of all this, not by himself. If he was honest, the idea terrified him. He would still find his brother, of course, and tell Fergus of the change in plans, but first came his mother. I can't do this. I can't.

"You coming?" Harvey asked Frida when the mabari didn't immediately move to follow him.

She let out a happy yip, as if she'd just been waiting for an invitation, and jumped up to hurry after him--still trying to lick up the rat blood splattered on his armor.
"Frida, stop," Harvey muttered in exasperation. "I'll clean it up later, okay?"

She whined, clearly intent on playing nursemaid. Harvey decided the best course was to simply ignore her for now.

It was just his luck that his mother was talking to Lady Landra when Harvey finally found her. It was going to be hard enough essentially begging, he was not doing it in front of the bann's wife. So he waited patiently and smiled politely until Lady Landra excused herself.

"I know that look," the teyrna chuckled softly, one eyebrow quirking at the state of her son's armor and daggers. "What wrong?"

Harvey took her to one side for just a bit more privacy and pulled in a deep breath to brace himself. "I-I know you'd planned to go with Lady Landra, Mother, but I... your advice is needed here. I need it. You know I've never been given responsibility like this before. The guards and militia, they've known you their whole lives, most of them, and would respect your authority.

Far more then they would mine, he couldn't help but add mentally, trying his best to look as incompetent as possible. This was not as hard as it should have been, he had to grudgingly admit to himself.

His mother sighed, reaching up to brush imaginary dust or--quite possibly--very real leftover rat fur off his shoulder. "Aren't you forgetting that they've known you your whole life as well, Harvey?"

He couldn't help but wince. "Mm. Most of them probably remember the screaming brat they managed to flatten during sword practice. That will be great for morale, I'm sure," he joked, mildly surprised at how much bitterness found its way into his voice.

"Harvey." His mother looked at him with a level of seriousness he rarely received from her. "So you want me to stay and hinder your authority even more? No, that won't do and you know it." The light of mirth slipped back into her eyes. "Besides, we both know if I stay, you'll be out of the castle before I've finished unpacking."

Drat. She'd caught him. Harvey tilted his head and shrugged apologetically. Had he really expected any different? She was his mother and knew him better than anyone. Besides, the way the salty wind and open spaces of the Coastlands called to him, especially this time of year, was far from secret.
"That's true, I guess," he sighed in defeat before half-heartedly teasing, "Just... don't be surprised when you see a mountain of rubble instead of the castle upon your return."
She chuckled and tilted his head down to kiss him on the forehead the way she had when he was a little boy. He liked the gesture, even if it embarrassed him a little now. "I really doubt that will happen, darling. I know you, and you'll do just fine."

Harvey wished he could believe that as strongly as she did. But if she thought he could do it... well, he could at least try. "If you say so. I need to find Fergus. I've already gotten sidetracked once..."

His mother smiled. "That's my boy."

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Trinne could quite happily spend a week in the Cousland library. It very nearly rivaled the one at the tower, and a lot of the history books were ones she hadn't read before. Trinne pulled a few of the dauntingly thick tomes off the shelf and settled herself sideways in one of the wooden chairs shoved against the wall, legs dangling over the arm as she cracked open the first book.

She was so lost in the history, she didn't even notice when Iona and a red-haired nobleman passed through the library on their way to the study, and she was barely disturbed by the pair of young page boys complaining to their grey-bearded tutor about history being boring. That registered enough to tease a snort of disbelief from the mage. "Not if you learn it right, kid..."

Trinne muttered to herself, twisting a short lock of hair around her index finger as she lost herself in the events of long ago—at least until the next interruption.

"Aldous, have you seen Oren?" The woman asking sounded only mildly concerned, but Trinne still looked up, as much to relieve the crick in her neck as out of curiosity.

"No, Teyrna, I'm afraid I haven't," the elderly tutor replied, brow furrowing with worry. "Has he gone missing?"

The teryna laughed softly. "You know what little boys are like, Aldous. Oriana just wants to know where he's gotten to." She shook her head, delicately brushing back an escaped wisp of grey hair. "Probably in the stables playing at being a knight, like as not..."

Aldous let out a rusty sounding chuckle of his own. "Too much of his father in that young rip. D'you remember when Fergus was such a rascal?"

"I do indeed," the teryna nodded. "Just keep an eye out for Oren, yes? Tell him his mother's looking for him if you see him." "I will, my lady," Aldous acquiesced, bowing his head respectfully.

"Many thanks, from myself and Oriana both," the teryna smiled before leaving the library.

Quiet once again settled over the room, broken only by the shuffling of papers as Aldous prepared his next lesson for his young pupils, but Trinne was too distracted wondering about this mischievous little boy named Oren, and it took a few minutes for her interest in the half-read text laying across her lap to return.

"Right, Calenhad and Elethea..." she muttered, fingering the old pages and plunging back into the narrative. This time nothing distracted her until Duncan came looking for her.

"Trinne." The Warden's hand on her shoulder made her jump, and Trinne was blushing slightly when she looked up.

"Hm..what?" she asked, biting her lip as she met his gaze.

"They will be serving dinner shortly," he explained. "There is only just time for you to freshen up if"
you would like."

Trinne glanced down at her robes and ran an appraising hand through her hair. "I... probably should," she admitted sheepishly. She picked up a small scrap of loose vellum and used it to mark her page. "So... did you start testing R- Ser Gilmore?" she asked as she set the book aside and stood, stretching to get the kinks out of her spine. *Oh, to know a healing spell...* she thought ruefully. *So long is one position, my back is killing me.*

"I did," Duncan replied with a nod. "He is indeed a fine warrior. I think it quite likely I shall recruit him."

Trinne suppressed a cheer and tried to look nonchalant. "Oh, good. I-I met him in the hallways," she couldn't help adding when Duncan raised an eyebrow at her. Apparently, her excitement had still shown. "He was quite a gentleman; escorted me to the library. He seemed the kind of man I'd want fighting by my side." *Good looks and all...*

"That's quite a confident assessment for a conversation only a few minutes in length," Duncan commented.

Trinne shrugged and tried not to blush. "I'm good at reading people."

Duncan was gracious enough to not ask why, then, she'd failed to notice her best friend was lying to her. The mage finally seemed like she'd relaxed and stopped thinking about those events every second of the day, and he didn't want to spoil her freshly recovered good mood. So instead, he simply commented, "Well, if his character is of the same quality as his skill with a blade, the Grey Wardens will benefit from his recruitment almost as much as yours."

Trinne snorted and blushed a little. "Gee, thanks, Duncan. Nice to know there won't be obscenely high expectations set on me or anything."

He chuckled. "I told you; we only recruit the best. You will both be in fine company. For now, however, I'll leave you to prepare for dinner."

"Right. Dinner," Trinne muttered as she ducked into her room. "Do I even remember how to behave at an upper class dinner like this?" At the tower, all the apprentices ate together, amid mass chaos and swaps of what you didn't want for something your neighbor didn't, snitching bites from your friends' plates or bowls while their backs were turned, and them retaliating in kind. The last time she'd been educated in "proper" manners, it was manners meant for an eight year old, more along the lines of *Be seen and not heard* than anything else.

*Maker help me...* she couldn't help but think as she smoothed out her robes again and tried to brush her hair. That part didn't go so well. Short as it may have been, her black mop was as unruly as ever.

"I give up," the mage finally hissed in frustration, just as Duncan knocked on the half-open door to collect her for dinner.

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The meal went fast, if a little quiet. Everyone's minds were occupied by their own thoughts. Mostly, Trinne assumed, relating to the empty chair that served as a reminder for the entirety of the meal that the Couslands' older son had already left for Ostagar, and that the teyrn and his friend--Arl Howe, Trinne learned--would be departing in the morning.

*That* she was exceedingly glad to know. Teyrn Cousland was a nice enough man, but the arl was plain old *creepy*. More than once during the course of the meal, she caught him staring at her, his
look bordering between lechery and a glare. Trinne distracted herself from this discomfiting thought by focusing on not doing anything dumb. Whoever had arranged the seating put her between Duncan and Oriana, and the noblewoman was gracious enough to whisper gentle correction whenever the mage was about to make a mistake. Trinne shot more grateful looks at that woman than she did Jowan in primal magic class.

When the meal was over, Trinne excused herself and stopped in the library on her way back to her room. She'd been smack in the middle of reading about the Battle of Lothering and she was not stopping until she'd finished. She frowned when she noticed the door to her room was pushed open further than she'd left it. She didn't mind so much the breach of privacy--no one from the Circle would--but she couldn't help wondering who would need to go in her room, not to mention why. A quick scan showed her pack right where she'd dropped it, the bed undisturbed, and her staff--

--was missing. The book on Cousland history thudded down on the bedside table as Trinne fought the urge to swear. Even if the length of blackened heartwood served as a constant reminder of one of the worst days of her life, it was a good weapon. And the only one she had.

"Who in the bloody Void would steal a mages staff?!" she growled, frowning at the place where she'd left it leaning against the wall.

Almost as if in answer, she sneezed. Dog, the mage realized. My room reeks of dog. Her nose wrinkled as she amended, And rat guts. She scowled. Harvey's mutt--Frida, had he called her?--had invaded her room and stolen her staff. That thought elicited a groan from the mage. The Couslands' younger son had made his escape from the dining hall almost as fast as she had, probably making a beeline for his room. If that dog was with him, Trinne would have to go where she'd been expressly told not to in order to get it back. Course, that never stopped me before... she reminded herself with a rueful grin.

She still checked to make sure no one else was around as she stepped through the doorway that separated the guest quarters and the family's. She could hear young Oren arguing with his mother behind the closed door to her right, and she assumed the door straight ahead lead to the teryn and teyrna's room. Following that logic, she wanted the room to her left. Trinne sighed and ran one hand through her hair, not particularly looking forward to another run-in with Harvey Cousland. But if his dog had made off with her staff, it could hardly be avoided. Maybe I'll get lucky and only the mutt will be in there... Even as she thought it, the mage rolled her eyes at herself. I'm not that lucky... She took one more deep breath to steel herself and strode purposefully toward the doorway. "Hey, mutt!!"
Betrayal

Completely ignoring the warning she’d gotten about not disturbing the Cousland family--that damn dog had her staff--Trinne let her stomping, anger-fueled strides carry her toward her goal. She could hear Frida inside the room, yipping excitedly and totally oblivious to the wrath of the approaching mage. Then came Harvey's voice, pitched too low for her to make out words but obviously aimed at the dog, and a happy bark from the mabari, who was obviously expecting praise for her new find.

Trinne let out a growl of frustration. Whether due to the general situation or the fact she would have to talk to Harvey, rather than simply snatch her staff away from the dog and be back in her room before the beast could protest, she wasn't sure. Probably both.

Her hand slapped against the stone doorway to Harvey's room, the aggravated noise enough to draw the attention of both of the room's occupants. Harvey quirked an eyebrow at her in surprise, but Frida just let out another happy bark at the prospect of more company--and attention. Oh, I'll give you attention, you bloody mutt. "I'll take that back, if you don't mind," she snapped, thrusting out her hand and jerking her head in a curt nod toward the staff Harvey was loosely grasping, having just retrieved it from Frida's jaws.

"Oh, um, sure..." He held it out, and the mage snatched it out of his hands.

Ewww, it's all slimy now... Trinne groaned internally as her fingers slipped against the well-slobbered wood. She whipped her attention off Harvey and onto the sprawling mabari that sat at his feet. "You, mutt, you slobbered all over my staff! You could've ruined it! If you ever touch it again, I'll..." Her rage sputtered out--at least momentarily--as the dog stared up at her with huge, apologetic brown eyes, silently pleading Don't be mad, I was just having fun, please like me, I really want you to like me... Her love for all things furry won out over her anger, and Trinne felt the scowl all but melt off her face. "Just don't do it again," she muttered, turning on her heel and stomping out of the room as fast as she'd stormed in.

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Frida yipped again and looked at Harvey plaintively, as if needing reassurance she was still loved in the wake of the mage's abrupt departure.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Even when you listen, you manage to get me in trouble," he muttered at his dog. She whined and nudged his hand. "No more fetch," he informed her emphatically--not that that ever did any good--as he scratched between her ears. "I need to get to bed; I have to get up early tomorrow..."

Frida made known her opinion of that with a disgruntled huff, and Harvey couldn't help but quirk a small smile as he started unbuckling his armor. "I'm not exactly happy about it either. Trust me."

The mabari gave his hand a comforting lick before curling up in the corner, a position Harvey knew would change to her being spread-eagle across half of his floor well before the night was over.

>>X<<

Trinne waited until she was back in her room to truly inspect the damage done to her staff by Harvey's demon dog, plunking down crossed-legged on the bed as she ran her hands gingerly over the saliva-coated wood. Andraste's ass, it's all slobbered and disgusting now!!! Her fingers snagged on a pair of indentations in the wood, twin gashes that had not been there when she left for dinner. "Are those... teeth marks?" she demanded of no one in particular. Upon closer examination,
she confirmed that yes, they were. The noise that eked between her clenched teeth was torn between a groan and a sigh. "Stupid nobles and their stupid dogs... and I have to stay here for a few days with that--"

"Are you a mage?"

Trinne's head whipped up at the question, her tirade screeching to a halt mid-sentence, and she blinked at the tousle-haired boy standing in front of her. *I really need to get in the habit of closing my door...*

"What's your name?" the boy persisted. "Are you a mage? Father said there's a mage in the castle."

She couldn't help but smile as she set aside her staff to worry over later. "I'm Trinne. And yes, I'm a mage. Are you Oren?"

His eyes doubled in size. "How'd you know?"

"I heard your grandmother talking about you," Trinne explained, trying not to laugh at his wonderment.

"Oooh." Oren nodded. "So, if you're a mage, does that mean you know spells?"

"Pssh, yeah, I know spells," Trinne laughed. "Lots of spells."

"Showme showme showme!" he begged.

Trinne's mind instantly filled with the image of disapproving glares and Duncan demanding to know what she'd been *thinking* treating magic so carelessly around a child. "Ehhh... I'm not so sure that's a good idea..." she mumbled flopping back on the bed. "I dunno how happy your parents would be about me performing magic with you around."

"Please?" Oren begged, expression sliding into a puppy-eyes look to rival Frida's.

"Well..." *What could one itsy-bitsy spell hurt?* She huffed out a sigh, blowing her bangs out of her eyes. "Ah, what the Fade, why not."

"Yess!" the boy cheered as the mage pushed herself back up into a sitting position.

"On one condition," she amended, and he froze. Trinne pressed one finger to her lips and whispered conspiratorially, "You have to keep it a secret."

Oren nodded eagerly. "Okay!"

She couldn't help grinning at his enthusiasm. Now she just had to figure out something both awe-inspiring and relatively safe to cast. Given her horrible record with fire spells, *that* option was most definitely off the table. She had only marginally more more success with ice spells, so those were out as well. *I can't really pull off earth spells indoors, and lightning is too difficult to control...* Trinne huffed out a sigh. She doubted Oren would find anything entropy-related exciting, and those were her best spells. Then it hit her. "So, you want to see magic..."

"YES!" Oren's eyes were huge with excitement.

"Then let's see what I can whip up." She flickered her wrist in the air, fingers curving around the spell wisp that materialized in the center of her palm. The pale yellow light flashed brighter, floating in mid-air as she lowered her hand and smiled at Oren's wide-eyed wonderment.
"What's it do?" he asked in an awed whisper.

"Lots of things," Trinne replied as the wisp bobbed between her and the boy, growing til it was half the size of her head. "It gives off light--very handy for reading under the covers--and enhances the power of my spells, primarily."

He started to reach towards the glowing sphere and then snatched his hand back. "Can I touch it?"

Trinne smiled. "Oh, sure. It's not dangerous or anything. Y'know, this is the very first spell I learned how to do..."

"Really?" Oren glanced at her as he reached up and tentatively let his fingers brush against the spell wisp. It flared brighter at his touch, and the boy giggled as he pulled back. "It's warm!"

"Mm-hm. I was right around your age; playing with my sisters in the cellar. I still dunno how I cast it that first time..." the mage murmured, staring at the dancing orb of light. "It was dark and I was nervous, so I just did it."

"Is that how you found out you was a mage?" Oren cocked his head and looked back and forth between her and the wisp.

She nodded, cupping her hand under the wisp again and letting its light pulse between her fingers. "My sisters and I kept it quiet for as long as we could. Simone--she's the oldest--knew what would happen if other people found out."

"But they still found you. Or you wouldn't be here," Oren pointed out, still entranced by the glow.

Trinne shrugged. "I got caught practicing by a servant; she told my mum. And well... off to the Circle you go."

"Do you... Do you miss them?"

She nodded. "I do. But I had friends in the tower to not feel so lonely."

"That's good." Oren bit his lip. "I... better go to bed now," he admitted reluctantly. "Or Mother will get mad at me."

"Well, we can't have that," Trinne agreed. She reached into the heart of the wisp and closed her fingers around its center. The light pulsed between her fingers for a few moments, and then faded away. There were less flashy ways of ending the spell; a motion similar to the one she'd used to summon it for one, but Oren seemed impressed by this method, so Trinne felt justified for showing off a little bit. "Now, you run along. I don't want you getting in trouble."

"Thanks," the little boy smiled, before turning and scurrying out of the room.

Well, maybe a few days here won't be so horrible... Trinne conceded to herself as she crossed her room to close the door behind him. She dried her staff off on the hem of her robe and leaned it against the wall. That done, she crawled up on the bed and picked up her book, determined to finish the story of the Battle of Lothering, if not more, before she fell asleep. The aged tome fell open to her makeshift bookmark, and the mage lost herself once again in the tale of long ago battles.

>>>X<<<

"--Trinne."
She fought her way back up through sleep as the hurried, gruff voice penetrated her consciousness, finally jerking upright and raking tangled hair out of her eyes to glare frosty disapproval at Duncan. "What?"

He hardly seemed to notice her displeasure at being so abruptly awakened. "Get your things, and be on your guard."

Something that sounded very much like a scream tore through the air at that exact moment, lending weight enough to his words Trinne decided not to argue. "What's happening?" she demanded as she scrambled out of bed and snatched up her staff and pack.

"The Castle is under attack," Duncan replied tersely, lightly grasping her arm to hurry her along.

Trinne resisted slightly, glancing back at the family quarters. "What about the Couslands?"

He shook his head. "Howe's men will only want the teyrn. He never went to bed, so they shouldn't bother with the personal quarters. Even if they do, the teyrn's wife and son are both more than capable of taking care of themselves."

"Wait, did you say Howe?" Trinne frowned in confusion as she stumbled along behind him. "I thought--"

"He has betrayed his friend's trust and attacks when the castle is weakest," Duncan explained.

"And we're going... where, exactly?" While she wasn't eager to risk getting herself killed, especially over some fight that wasn't her own, the thought of running away didn't sit well with the mage.

"To find the teyrn and help him, if needed," came the reply. Duncan finally let go of her arm as they rounded a corner and came face to face with a group of skulking soldiers wearing Howe livery. Before the startled men—or Trinne, for that matter—could react, the Warden had pulled free both sword and dagger and started moving. He dealt death almost as if he were dancing; the creeping men unwilling partners in the macabre artistry of his movements.

Is that how rogues fight? Trinne wondered as she pressed her back against the wall and gaped as the four corpses hit the ground, two with slit throats and two with rent armor and fatal wounds. She blinked owlishly at the amount of blood that coated their armor and slicked the stones under their limp forms. It brought back memories; and not pleasant ones.

>>X<<

"No, I won't let you touch her!"

"Jowan! Jowan, wait!"

>>X<<

"Trinne." Duncan gently shook her shoulder in tandem with the insistent hissing of her name. "We have to keep moving." He headed down the hallway, in the direction of the great hall.

"They... they were heading for the living quarters," she mumbled as she followed. "There's nothing else back here. Those soldiers were looking for the bedrooms, Duncan." An image of what such men might do to poor little Oren swept through her mind and Trinne visibly shuddered.

"Teyrn Cousland is more important, and he is in greater danger," Duncan replied sternly, reading her intent in her eyes. "And as I said before, the teyrna and her son are more than capable of defending
themselves, should the need arise."

"It looks an awful bloody lot like it might," Trinne muttered. "Can't we warn them or something at least?"

Duncan shook his head, mouth set in a grim line. "With every passing moment the teyrn's chances diminish. He is a skilled warrior, but taken unawares and without armor or weapons at his disposal, I fear he will not survive long."

"Alright, then," Trinne huffed, whisking strands of hair out her eyes as their pace increased to a near-run. "You keep alluding to their son being a skilled fighter. D'you know something that I'm missing? Because he does not give the impression of being a capable fighter...

"Impressions are dangerous things, Trinne," Duncan answered, a wry note edging his words. "You give the impression of a brash, rebellious girl with a stick."

"Actually, add 'and magic at her command' and that is a pretty good summation of who I am," she shot back with a smirk. "Bad example, Duncan."

"But it's not all you are, given your love of reading and the fact I overheard Oren telling his mother you're a very nice lady."

She blinked in surprise. "He said that?"

"Yes. So just as 'brash, rebellious girl with a stick' is not all you are, perhaps you haven't seen everything that Harvey Cousland is, either."

"We--" Trinne's huffy retort was cut off as they ran into another band of Howe soldiers, this one slightly larger than the last and more alert. "Duncan!"

But he was already in motion, felling two of the soldiers before the others had time to react. The third man, however, managed to get his shield up in time to parry Duncan's blow. He pushed forward with the hardened wooden shield and forced Duncan to back up a pace.

Gathering her wits, Trinne hastily and instinctively threw the first spell that came to mind in the soldier's general direction. He stumbled in his charge, disoriented enough to miss Duncan completely, and the Warden wasted no time finishing him off. Trinne wasn't even paying attention to him anymore, having turned her attention to the rest of the group. Thinking a little more clearly now, she waved a hand toward the remaining soldiers, the air warping with a sickly tan light as they all slowed, their movements becoming clumsy and their energy gone. Duncan threw himself toward the center of the group, taking all of them with little trouble--except one who broke off to come after the mage.

"Bitch, what did you do?!" the gap-toothed soldier seethed at her as he closed in, swinging and missing, but getting too close for comfort all the same. Trinne swallowed the fear worming up her throat and let a lightning bolt leap from her hand to the center of the man's chest. He convulsed, letting out a loud--short--yell of pain as he fell to the ground.

The mage skirted the still-twisting form to rejoin Duncan and glanced back at the man as she answered his question, despite the fact he could no longer hear her. "Kicked your arse, apparently."
Best Laid Plans

The frenzied barking initially filtered in as just another irritant in his dreams. One more nonsensical detail thrown in by the Fade to confuse him even further.

Or so Harvey figured, until it didn't stop. By the time he was awake enough--if just barely--to realize that was Frida barking her head off and not some random mabari in his dreams, she'd been at it long enough he was vaguely surprised no one had pounded on his door and demanded he shut that dog up so they could sleep. He was about ready to give her a good scolding himself, and he had more patience with her than anyone.

Frida growled, low and dangerous, her eyes glued on his door, and then barked harshly a few more times. Harvey wondered if this was another mess like the rats; his dog getting more excited about something than warranted and causing trouble for him.

Even as he sat up and instinctively raked his hair out of his eyes, trying to wake up enough to shush the blighted animal, two things happened. Frida let out a particularly loud and vicious bark, her hackles up and her entire body tensed to lunge at something, and the door to his room slammed open to reveal a pair of soldiers clad in sturdy leather armor, the closer of the two still in the act of running through one of the Couslands' servants.

In that stunned, surreal moment as Harvey tried to decide if he was truly awake or still dreaming, Frida was his only saving grace. The mabari did not share her master's hesitance and lunged for the first attacker her paws could reach, slamming the man to the ground and setting her teeth to his throat. The second soldier dodged around his fallen companion and the snarling mabari to make straight for Harvey.

This is not a dream, the rogue's brain finally screamed at him. He is trying to kill you, and is going to succeed if you don't do something right now!

In almost the same moment, Harvey threw his blanket over the man's head and groped for one of the throwing daggers he kept on the bedside table. They weren't the best weapon in the world--especially given that he'd thrown them at the back of his door enough times they were getting dull--but he couldn't really afford to be picky right now. Just as the soldier muddled his way partially free of the dark green blanket, Harvey's fingers wrapped around the handle of a dagger and he whipped it in a mostly instinctive arc to bury the short blade in the side of the man's neck. His attacker fell with a gurgle as Frida finished off the one she'd tackled.

Harvey sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the bodies, a sick feeling settling in his gut. If these men had tried to kill him in his own bloody room, that most likely meant there were more. They'll go after Fergus' family... and Mother. The sick feeling intensified and he started for the door, only to pause halfway there. He was only wearing his smallclothes, and aside from how utterly ridiculous he'd look if he went out there like this, he'd be dead in two seconds flat. He glanced at the chest where he stored his armor, and then down at Frida. The mabari perked up her ears and whined.

"Go find Mother," Harvey ordered, and for once the dog did exactly as he told her to. Trusting her ability to handle any of those men she might meet, he flung open the chest and pulled out his armor, fingers fumbling with the multitude of familiar, suddenly uncooperative straps in his haste. It only took a few minutes to pull on his armor, but it felt like hours before the last buckle cinched in place and he was grabbing his twin daggers from the bottom of the chest. Feeling somewhat more prepared now, if horribly delayed, Harvey followed after Frida and headed for his parents' bedroom.
He found her holding her own against the pair of soldiers who had been trying to break through the door to his parent's room—until they were set upon by a very angry, very protective mabari. That demanded full attention from both of them, and Frida was still winning. The distraction of Harvey's arrival claimed the soldiers' attention for a crucial second, and she knocked one of the men flat on his back. Knowing that one was as good as dead now, Harvey made for the other one. The man slashed at him with both daggers, and he dodged to the side, circling around behind the soldier and taking advantage of the narrow gap in his armor to drive one of his own daggers deep into the man's shoulder. His opponent swore and spun around, pulling free of the blade and aiming a kick at Harvey's legs. He avoided it, barely, and stumbled a little as he parried the man's retaliatory strike. As the soldier pushed all his weight into forcing Harvey's blades down, the rogue took advantage of the angle and cranked his elbow into the side of the taller man's head. Momentarily disoriented, and with both daggers hanging loosely from his hands, the soldier stumbled back a pace. Harvey finished him off by slashing his throat, more because it was the most readily available weak point than out of any particularly savage instinct. Even as the corpse hit the ground and he tried to catch his breath, the door to his parents' room swung open and his mother appeared, halting when she saw her younger son.

"Oh, Maker! Harvey, are you alright? You're not hurt are you?" she asked, giving him a quick once-over to check for damage. She could hardly have missed the blood coating his hands and dripping off his daggers, so her concern was justified.

Harvey shook his head, feeling a surge of relief that she was alright. "No, I'm fine. I was more worried about you."

The teryna smiled faintly. "They never even got through the door, thanks to you." Frida let out a hurt yip, and she corrected, "Thanks to both of you." Frida gave a mollified ruff and wagged her tail as the woman continued, "A scream woke me up, and there were men in the hall, so I barred the door."

She glanced down at the attackers' bodies, letting out a small gasp at the sight of the insignia one bore. "D'you see his shield? These are Howe's men!"

"What?!" In all honesty, he hadn't even looked at the shields some of the men carried. He'd been focused on not dying and then on getting to his mother. Now that the immediate danger was gone, Harvey spared a glance at the shield of the man Frida had just killed. Sure enough, it bore the Howe family crest. "This doesn't make any sense," he muttered. "Why would he attack us?"

His mother shrugged helplessly. "The Maker only knows, darling. But we need to find your father. He never came to bed."

"Shouldn't we check on Oriana and Oren first?" Harvey suggested, and his mother froze in the act of reaching for her bow.

"Andraste's mercy, you don't think the soldiers went to your brother's room first, do you?" she demanded in horror, white as a sheet as she hastily snatched up her weapon and grabbed a quiver of arrows. "You're right; we should check on them first, and then find your father."

It was a plan sorely lacking in details, but given the fact they had no idea what was happening in the rest of the castle, it was still their best—if not only—choice. So mother and son headed for the rooms occupied by Fergus and his family, the teyrna whispering a desperate prayer that they would be alright. Harvey was the one to swing the door open, but his mother surged past him and into the room first. From the way her spine went rigid and the horrified gasp that she choked out, he knew without even looking that her worst fears had been realized.
"No! My little Oren!" she cried out, transfixed by the sight of her grandson's body. "What manner of fiend slaughters innocents?!

Harvey forced himself to swallow the bile rising in his throat at the jagged wound that cut across the little boy's neck. "Don't look, Mother," he urged, tugging gently on her arm in an attempt to get her to leave the room. Horrific as this was, they couldn't linger to mourn or they'd wind up dead too.

"Oh, I'll look," she seethed, her voice shaking as she stared at the crumpled and bloody bodies. "I'll remember this day when Howe dies screaming like the dog he is! Oh, poor Fergus.... let's go. I don't want to see this!" She whirled and left the room, a hand pressed over her mouth as if that would keep the tears at bay.

It was just more of the same in the guest quarters; Howe's men to fight and the bodies of Lady Landra and Dairren sprawled on the blood soaked rugs. Despite Harvey's repeated insistence that she shouldn't look, the teyrna did exactly that. Neither of them wanted to dwell on what might've happened to Iona.

As his mother lamented having asked Landra to come, Harvey checked the rooms opposite, but the Grey Warden and his recruit were gone. The rooms had obviously been left in haste, but there was no blood or other signs of struggle. He figured Duncan had still been awake when the attack began and collected the mage before getting out of their rooms, which was a wise move. He wondered if they were still somewhere in the castle or if they had fled outright. _Duncan at least looked like he could more than handle himself. Not so sure about her... Do they let the mages practice fighting?

He shook his head. There wasn't time for this. Whatever their guests may have done, the only option for him and his mother was to keep going until they found Father and then _get out._ That was the plan at least.

>>X<<

"How many places could the teryn be hiding?" Trinne grumbled, leaning her head against the wall to catch her breath. She wished like never before that she'd paid more attention in Wynne's class on healing and rejuvenation spells. Then she could do something about the mind-numbing exhaustion. She'd never engaged in such drawn-out combat before, and it had drained her much faster than she'd expected.

Duncan offered her a sympathetic smile. "There are only a couple more possibilities, and neither is terribly far from here."

"Finally, some good news," the exhausted mage muttered, digging through her half-unslung pack for a lyrium potion. Her fingers finally closed around a small vial of the faintly glowing blue liquid, and she yanked it out and downed it gratefully. The soft buzz of her mana being restored felt wonderful.

"Alright, let's go," she urged, pushing away from the wall. "Sooner we find him, the sooner we can get out of here."

She should have known better than anyone what can become of the best-laid plans, but Trinne had either forgotten or was ignoring her history. Which may have been why she was surprised when they found the teryn cornered in a side room, unarmed and alone--except for the trio of soldiers menacing him with various weapons.

"Y'know, these odds don't strike me as very fair," she commented breezily as she began building a lightning spell. The purplish-white light crackled in her palm as the men whirled to face this interruption.
"Lucky for us we don't play fair fair, honey," one of the men sneered.

"Oh, well, then you won't mind if we don't either," Trinne retorted, flinging the lightning bolt at him. The soldier raised his shield and the spell dissipated against the wood. *Non-conductor...* she reminded herself.

"You'll have to do better than that, girlie!" he taunted, moving closer.

"With pleasure, bastard," the mage shot back with a grin, summoning a weakness spell as Duncan moved to intercept the shortest of the thugs, who was moving back toward Teyrn Cousland at his leader's order.

Too late. Shorty dodged around the Grey Warden with almost liquid agility and buried one of his daggers deep in the teyrn's side. Duncan let out a cry of anger and beheaded him a moment later, but the damage was already done. And the dead man complicated matters even further when his falling corpse yanked the blade free of the wound, widening it and causing even more damage than it had on the way in.

Trinne took advantage of the split second of distraction afforded by the soldier's "success" and used her staff to sweep the brutish leader's feet out from under him. She flung one hand in his direction and he was promptly bathed in a sickly purple light. Even when he made it back to his feet, he couldn't hit her if his life depended on it--which it did.

The thug swung at her, his growing frustration at every miss plain, but Trinne just smirked at him as she coolly summoned another lightning spell and blasted him before he had a chance to defend himself.

In the meantime, Duncan had easily dispatched the third man and now knelt next to the badly wounded teyrn, gently prying the man's blood-slicked hands away from the wound so he could get a good look. Trinne saw the frustration and despair that flickered across his face as he looked over at her. "Trinne."

"Yes?" She paused midway through raking her hair out of her eyes.

He nodded for her to come closer before speaking to the teyrn. "Try not to move."

"Do... m'best," he coughed, grimacing at the pain.

Trinne had to fight the desire to recoil when she saw the severity of his wound. "Maker, Duncan," she whispered, "is he gonna be alright?"

He met her question with one of his own. "Are you any good with healing spells?"

The mage shook her head, feeling panic well up in her gut. "N-No. I never figured I'd actually need 'em, so I didn't pay attention..."

Duncan's eyes conveyed regret even before he spoke. "This is too deep for a healing salve and bandages to suffice, I'm afraid," he informed her softly. "Healing magic is his only chance."

Whether intended or not, his words sent a wave of guilt sweeping through Trinne. "I'm sorry..." she mumbled.

Before Duncan could reply, Teyrn Cousland groaned and tried to stand. "Need to... go..." Anything else he may have said was lost in a coughing jag, fresh blood seeping between his fingers.
"You need to stay still," Duncan admonished the man, placing a staying hand on his shoulder.

The teyrn shook his head, hand pressing more tightly against his wound. "Need... Need to find... Eleanor... Harvey..." He coughed again. "Make sure... they get out."

"There is no time, your lordship. You will simply have to trust in their skills," the Grey Warden urged.

"Not leaving... without them," the teyrn insisted, blue eyes steely.

Duncan sighed and gave in. "Very well. Where might they be?"

"Main Hall..." he grimaced. "or... kitchens. There's a... servants' entrance..."

"Trinne, can you assist him?" Duncan asked. "I'll take care of any who get in our way." She nodded, pulling the teyrn's arm around her shoulders and waiting until he was ready to begin walking. Despite her impatience to just get out of here, she made sure to let Duncan lead as they set off. Hopefully this new plan would work out better than the last one.
"Um, Duncan, I think we have a serious problem here," Trinne groaned, glancing down at where Teyrn Cousland's injury bumped against her side with every shuffling step they took. They'd made some decent progress with Duncan essentially acting as bodyguard while she supported the wounded teyrn. But the wicked gash in the man's side was still bleeding, crimson dropping to stain the stone hallways and smearing on her robes. "It won't stop."

Duncan eyed the blood oozing between the teyrn's finger and then met the man's gaze. "This is not good, your lordship. We really should simply get you out of here."

He shook his head obstinately. "Not... without my family."

Duncan sighed. "Very well." They continued on toward the main hall, both Duncan and Trinne hoping fervently they would find the man's wife and son there so they could leave, get him help before he bled to death. Along the way, they encountered a couple small groups of Howe soldiers, all of whom Duncan dispatched easily enough. But the last group, seven in total, counted a pair of more heavily armored knights among them, and Trinne was forced to help the best she could.

*One good thing about chainmail, the mage thought as she worked up a spell, It's made out of metal, and therefore, a fabulous conductor.*

The two men made the fatal error of standing close together, and the lightning bolt she sent zinging toward one made short work out of them both.

The more intense melee had its consequences, however; Duncan and Trinne were so focused on the men in front of them, they completely failed to notice the archer lurking in a side passage as he rapidly took aim, his arrow targeting Teyrn Cousland's unprotected back. Just as he let it fly, however, Trinne adjusted her grip around the teryn's waist and the arrow hit her arm instead.

"OW!" She couldn't help it; *that hurt*. Duncan spun around at her cry, just in time to keep her from involuntarily dropping the teryn as her arm muscles spasmed in pain.

"Hold still," the Warden ordered, catching her wrist as she moved her other hand to yank the arrow out. "That will just make it worse."

"Hold still," the Warden ordered, catching her wrist as she moved her other hand to yank the arrow out. "That will just make it worse."

"It can get worse?!" Trinne ground out between clenched teeth, staring at the shaft embedded in her arm. "Andraste's flaming knickerweasels, that hurts!"

Duncan cast a hasty look around for more of Howe's soldiers, but there were none to be seen. The archer had slunk off, and the rest were dead. He then carefully leaned the teyrn against the wall in order to have both hands free and met Trinne's gaze. "Hold still, and trust me," he implored in an undertone--before swiftly shoving the arrow the rest of the way through her arm. *That* had her swearing so harshly Teyrn Cousland shot her a questioning look, as if wondering where in Thedas she'd learned *that* particular word. Once the arrow point had breached the skin coming out, Duncan
snapped it cleanly off—which also hurt like the blazes—and worked the shaft back out of her arm as fast as he dared. He then swiftly tore off a strip of his tunic and bound up the wound.

"That will have to do for now," he informed her apologetically. "I will tend to it properly once we are away from the castle. You are lucky that hit where it did; matters would be far worse had it broken bone."

Trinne shot him a dubious look before glancing down at her arm, the fleshy part just below her elbow seeping red through the temporary bindings. She simply nodded, her lips pressed together in a thin line to keep from whimpering, and picked up her staff with her bad hand, offering her uninjured side to support the teryn. She still winced at the burden on her muscles, but she could stand this. "Let's go."

>>X<<

The teyrna and Harvey weren't in the main hall, just a group of Cousland soldiers led by Ser Gilmore, trying desperately to hold the gates.

"Your Lordship, what happened?" Gilmore demanded, voice full of alarm, when they staggered in.

"Howe's men..." the teryn managed.

"Bastards!" The knight's gaze moved to Duncan. "Am I correct in assuming you saved him?"

Duncan nodded. "I only wish it had been in time."

"Still, you have my thanks." Gilmore bowed to the Grey Warden before turning to Trinne. "Maker's breath, Trinne, what happened?"

The pure panic in his voice made her glance down at herself, and the mage was forced to admit she was a fright; robes all covered in blood, makeshift bandages tied around her arm. "Most of it's not mine, promise," she assured him. "Rory, are you alright?"

He gave her a tired smile. "Just not sure how long we can hold them. But we'll do our best to make sure you get the teryn out of here."

"Wait, you aren't coming with us?" she demanded, choking on her own panic now. No, no, no, this isn't happening...

Gilmore shook his head. "It's my duty to protect the teryn and his family--to the death, if need be--and I shan't abandon them now."

Her words all seemed to stick together, a huge jumble in her head, and Trinne couldn't make any come out in a coherent order. This is not how it's supposed to go!

"Ser Gilmore," the teryn began, grimacing and taking a breath before he continued. "Have you seen my wife..."

Ser Gilmore shook his head. "No, my lord. I've not seen the teyrna or your son. But I've been in here since the attack began," he added hastily. "I can keep watch for them, tell them you're looking for them should they come through."

Duncan nodded curtly, speaking for the teryn. "We appreciate it, Ser Gilmore. Should you see them, say the teryn will be waiting for them by the servants' exit in the larder. That is where we are heading now."
"Of course, ser. I'll do that." The knight bowed in solemn acquiescence.

"You would have made a fine Warden, lad," he murmured regretfully.

"Thank you, ser Warden, but my place is here."

Duncan nodded and led the way out of the hall.

"Rory," Trinne managed, trying not to completely break down as she looked at the knight.

"Farewell, my lady." He bowed to her as well, green eyes full of regret. "I'll miss getting to know you better. I was looking forward to that, perhaps more than I rightly should."

She forced a wobbly smile. "And the same to you. Are you sure-"

"Trinne, I have to stay. I swore an oath. I'll not break it now." She could see it in his eyes; no matter how much Rory Gilmore regretted the loss of what could have been, he wasn't going to budge. So she simply nodded and left, cursing Howe and hoping that at least Rory got the message to the teyrna and her son.

>>X<<

He was going to regret this, he just knew it. Harvey could tell just by the weight of the sword in his hands that trying to fight with this strapped to his back was going to throw him off balance. A lot. But it had been his mother's idea to save the generations-old family blade and the shield that went with it. He couldn't tell her no under the best of circumstances, and the smoke-thick air and sounds of harsh combat only lent more weight to her case for saving the heirlooms from falling into Howe's hands.

"Mother, you'll have to help," he informed her apologetically. The pocked and pitted metal shield was a bit heavier than the equally battleworn longsword he was in the process of strapping to his back. But Harvey figured it would offer her some added protection, and the sword was going to give him enough trouble on its own. He wasn't strong enough to handle both and still be able to fight.

"Of course, darling." The teyrna nodded understanding, already reaching for the laurel-emblazoned shield. It only took her a minute to settle it on her back, the quiver of arrows poking up between the metal edge and her shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"As I can be," Harvey muttered, rolling his shoulders in a vain attempt to get the family sword to rest more comfortably. "Let's go. Any guesses where we might find Father?"

"The front gates," his mother replied, cautiously stepping into the hallway, an arrow nocked on her bowstring just in case. "I can't think of anywhere else he'd go with... this happening."

"We'll have to get to the main hall, then," he muttered, more thinking out loud than explaining to her.

She nodded. "Let's go."

Harvey gave the belt securing the sword one final twitch, already not liking the additional strain on his shoulders, and led the way out of the room.

>>X<<

All of his worst fears concerning the added weight of the sword and its effect on his balance proved valid with the first group of enemy soldiers they encountered after leaving the treasury, so close it
was almost as if they had been lying in wait. Harvey stopped hard, his momentum still trying to carry him forward. The closest of the soldiers took a swing at him, and the rogue instinctively recoiled, the weight of the sword pulling further than he'd intended to go. The only thing that kept him from landing on his back in a graceless heap was the wall behind him, and the only thing that kept the soldier from following up his attack with another was the fact that the teyrna was a very good shot.

Still fighting the added weight on his back--and mildly surprised three or four pound could make that much difference--Harvey pushed away from the wall to help with the remaining soldiers. The men were all dispatched quickly enough, as were the few others they encountered between the treasury and the main hall. That proved to be an honest-to-goodness battle; Howe's men even had a mage. However, they didn't keep that particular advantage long. Teyrna Eleanor needed no encouragement from her son to make the blonde elf her priority target. Her first arrow hit the woman in the shoulder, interrupting the lightning bolt she was about to fling at Ser Gilmore, and the second finished her off.

Both shots together took her only as much time as Harvey needed to join the fight along the miserably few Cousland guards who remained in the room. He and Frida took out two of three men who had ganged up on an archer, and in the process he quite unintentionally tripped the third one. And once the man went down, Frida made sure he stayed that way. Once all the enemy soldiers lay dead, Harvey rejoined his mother as she spoke to Ser Gilmore, who looked quite a bit worse for the wear; covered in blood and barely staying on his feet.

"Ser Gilmore, have you seen my husband?" the teyrna all but demanded, a pleading note underlying her question.

The knight nodded--almost reluctantly, it seemed to Harvey--and ran one hand through his sweaty hair. "I did, your Ladyship. He..." Gilmore sighed, wincing at the news he had to deliver. "He'd been badly wounded, though."

Harvey watched his mother pale visibly at the warning. "Where... Where is he now?" she asked, trying desperately to keep calm.

"At the servants' exit in the larder. He was going to wait for you there. You'd best hurry, I don't know how much longer we can hold them."

"Thank you, Ser Gilmore." Even when worried and watching her home burn around her, the teyrna managed to give the ginger-haired knight a small smile. "Having a knight such as yourself has been an honor."

He bowed. "The honor and pleasure have both been mine, your Ladyship." All their head swung toward the massive gates as a particularly harsh blow landed. "Now go, get out of here, quickly!"

"Maker watch over you, Ser Gilmore," the teyrna said sadly, moving for the door at the edge of the hall.

"Maker watch over us all," the knight replied fervently before returning his attention to the gates.

Harvey had his doubts about whether or not the Maker was watching over any of them, but he kept his mouth shut as he and his mother made for the kitchens. Mercifully, there was only one small band of soldiers they had to fight between them and their goal. The more heavily-armored knight was a bit of a problem, but even armor had weak points that were necessary to allow movement, and Harvey had made sure he knew them all. While not able to move a quickly as he might've liked, he still dealt
with the knight in a tolerably decent fashion. Would've gone better if he'd managed to avoid the metal-bound elbow that crashed into his jaw hard enough he saw stars for a second or two, but so long as the enemies were dead and he and his mother--and Frida--weren't, he wasn't going to complain. Not now. He shook off the threatening headache and followed his mother, watching behind them as she hurried through the kitchen to the larder.

"Maker's breath, Bryce!!" he heard her gasp, and abandoned all thoughts of watching their backs, spinning to see what had earned such a reaction from his normally reserved mother. Looking turned to hurrying across the room when he saw the huge crimson stain blossoming on his father's side, scarlet filling the cracks in the floor beneath him. Even before he reached his father's side, his mind told him the cause was lost. Still, his hands rummaged, helplessly studying the makeshift bandage for a few moments before realizing there was nothing there to fix. Whoever was responsible had done the job well enough.

"Andraste's knickerweasels, there you are! Duncan went looking for you!" The warden recruit's explanations drew his mother's attention, but Harvey was more focused on the blood still seeping through his father's clothes. How to sneak a wounded man out of a castle under siege? Not to mention staying ahead of the more than possible pursuit... His heart sank. There was just no way. And from the short glance the elder Cousland gave him, it seemed he knew it too.

"I'm not going to make it." There was no self pity in Bryce Cousland's voice, as he--totally ignoring his wife's protests--helped himself up and rested against a large sack of flour, heels scrabbling to brace himself against the blood-slicked floor.

The teyrna scoffed the way Harvey saw her do many times, usually when her husband overworked himself or on the rare occasions when they disagreed on something. It seemed strangely out of place now. "Don't say that... we'll get you out of here. We can find you healing magic..." his mother promised, and Harvey truly, desperately wanted to believe her. At her mention of healing magic he looked up at the mage girl--Trinne--his mind prompted, but she only shifted uncomfortably, looking guilty, which brutally quashed what little hope he'd had. If she could help, she would've done it already.

Bryce shook his head, choosing to ignore comforting lies. "I won't survive the standing, I think." He grimaced, a painful spasm wracking his body. "Someone needs to reach Fergus, tell him what happened. Howe cannot get away with what he's done!" He was getting paler, Harvey noticed numbly...and he knew what it meant, even if he had a hard time accepting it. He knew how a person on the verge looked, but he would never imagine... Not Father!

"Bryce, don't be foolish, you can tell him yourself!" his mother started, fingers curling into the fabric of her husband's shirt.

A hand brushing gently over teyrna's cheek silenced her protests. "Elen, the castle is surrounded. You're not going to make it out with me burdening you," he reasoned softly. She reached to hold his hand closer to her face, his fingers leaving bloody stains on her skin. Harvey watched his mother's expression change from determination to complete hopelessness.

Grief would have to wait. He needed to get her out of here.

"I'm afraid teyrn speaks the truth, your ladyship." The rogue spun around at the new voice, silently cursing himself for letting someone sneak up on them, before his brain registered the polite tone as the one belonging to Duncan, the senior Grey Warden. The man entered the larder clearly tired, sheathing his sword in the scabbard on his back. "The castle is surrounded. Howe's men haven't found this exit yet, but it's only a matter of time. The main gates won't hold much longer," he warned. "The teyrn and I tried to reach you sooner."
"My son helped me get here, Maker be praised," she explained.

"I am not surprised."

Harvey couldn't help but glance at his mother, a seasoned warrior, and then at Frida, who was currently in the process of trying to give the--protesting--Warden girl a bath, completely ignoring the severity of the situation they were in. Still, she was the most trusty war hound when it counted. His mother was vastly exaggerating his contribution.

Teyrn Cousland saw his chance. "Duncan, I beg of you, take my son and wife to safety."

The Grey Warden considered it for a briefest of moments. "Very well, but I must ask for something in return." His tone was somehow regretful, and Harvey wondered if he saw the dark eyes shifting between his father and himself.

"Anything."

"I came to your castle seeking a recruit. The darkspawn threat demands that I leave with one."

Duncan was now looking directly at Harv, apologetic even as he refrained from sugarcoating his intentions.

The rogue's face darkened. The family home was crumbling, and this man--a guest--was standing here making demands. Even aside from that, he was still confused. "You came here for Gilmore, did you not? Last time I checked he was protecting the main gates buying us time." He drew out the last words, trying to emphasize that they were carelessly wasting his gift.

Duncan's gaze didn't falter. "Actually, you were always my first choice," he admitted, his response receiving a muffled gasp from the mage girl.

Harvey felt his eyebrows arch incredulously, it was the second time the Grey Warden was offering, his proposition sounded no less ridiculous now.

"Let it be then," the teyrn quickly agreed.

The rogue's eyes widened as he feverishly shook his head protesting the unexpected words. "My place is beside you," he objected, and felt embarrassed straightaway; Even he had to admit how childish that must have sounded. Becoming a Grey Warden was not the main issue here, he realized, as he tried his best to squash the sickening feeling that he had just been sold. Because even if that were the case, it was freedom for his life, and he wouldn't get to cherish the first one without the other. It wasn't even a choice. He felt ashamed that he still hoped his father would reconsider, but he couldn't help it.

"Couslands put duty above all, Pup...you should know it by now." His father stayed firm--a man's dying wish, it seemed.

Even as his eyes burned, Harvey found himself nodding in acceptance. So this was goodbye. Not fair...he had so many things he was putting off to say later, when he would've found enough courage. He wouldn't get another chance now. It was awfully difficult to look his father straight in the eyes, but it needed to be said. He swallowed. "I'm sorry I wasn't..."

"None of that." He was momentarily silenced by the stern tone, one his father hadn't used on him for years. For a few heartbeats the faint echoes of Howe's men trying to storm the front gates were the only sound in the larder. The teyrn's features softened, the last strength draining from him, giving way to the faintest shadow of a smile. "There is no time for that... Son, please."
Harvey grit his teeth and gave him one painful— and final— nod. As always, he was right. "Fergus will know about this, I promise." He lightly squeezed his father's hand and then looked up at Duncan, who just finished barricading the door. "Will you take me and my mother to Ostagar?"

"You have my word," the older man nodded in affirmation.

Harvey's lips formed a thin line. A small, proud part of his mind still insisted he was able to bring Mother to safety on his own. But he could deceive himself all he wanted, the odds were... well, not in his favor, to say the least. "I accept, then."

His legs burned slightly under the weight of the family sword as he got up, firmly tugging on his mother's shoulder for her to follow. His father was losing consciousness, growing limper with every minute, and the sudden noise coming from the main hall announced the fall of the castle's last defense. They had to leave, now. But to his shock, the teyrna seemed to have other plans. Harvey felt a cold shiver run down his spine when she didn't get up.

"Darling, my place is at my husband's side," she said calmly, meeting her son's suddenly hollow gaze. She shook her head, Bryce's weakening body slumped down to rest on her knees. "Don't look at me like that, we had a good life. I'm going to delay those bastards for you, I'll kill every one of them who enters this room," she swore.

"Mother, please..." he started, words leaving him completely. This is not happening, he thought, dazed. This was not his plan.

"I'm not going to leave my husband," his mother repeated firmly, a sad smile adorning her features. "You have your role and I have mine, darling. It's up to you and Fergus now." Seeing her youngest was not going to accept her wish so easily, she addressed the Grey Warden. "Duncan, please, take care of him," she begged.

The man nodded. "We need to go."

His sudden push towards the exit almost made Harvey lose his balance. He turned his head to his mother, but Duncan was already leading him from behind, one hand on the young Cousland's back, forcing him away from his family. The mage girl opened the door to a cellar-like corridor servants used to enter the castle and disappeared ahead, Frida running close behind her.

The last thing the rogue saw was the silhouette of his mother gently hugging her husband's limp body. And all he could do was mouth a silent: "I'm sorry."

Then, they ran.
It's all my fault. True or no, the self-condemnation kept circling through Trinne's mind as their small group crept down the tunnel and cautiously snuck past the ring of guards Howe had posted around the castle. The teyrn had been right; there was no way they could've gotten away if they'd brought him with them. My fault, the mage thought mournfully. If only I'd paid attention in Wynne's class, I could've healed him. Then he and the teyrna would be coming with us and their son would be slightly less miserable. She glanced over at the rogue. Best she could tell in the faint light--most of which came from the burning castle behind them--his face was a perfectly blank, emotionless mask. The slump of his shoulders, however, spoke of a misery that had its roots in something deeper than trudging through the woods in the wee hours of the morning. Even the added weight of the sword slung across his back couldn't entire account for it, not entirely. Still, at this point, she figured the best thing she could do was just leave him alone.

Which actually worked out rather well, considering how damned difficult it was to pick her way through the woods in the dark. The trees that hid them from view of Howe's men also blocked most of the light, and she'd already stubbed her toes or banged her shins against stumps more times than she cared to think. She shivered as the breeze picked up, making the tolerably cool atmosphere move closer to chilly, and dodged around yet another tree that seemed to appear out of nowhere right in front of her. She barely resisted the urge to curse as a low hanging branch raked through her hair, tousling the already-messy waves in a less than pleasant manner.

Trinne sighed and ran her hand through her hair, the movement making her arm give a sharp twinge as a reminder that it was still injured, thank you very much. She bit back a hiss at the pain. They were away, yes, but there wasn't enough ground between them and the castle for stopping to be a good idea. She'd just tough it out until they were a safe distance away. Such a point came a good half hour hour later, in a small copse of trees that Duncan deemed far away and hidden enough to be safe even if Howe's men should come searching.

The young Cousland sat on a log a short distance off, staring at nothing and thinking about who-knew-what. Frida whined and rested her head in his lap, and he aimlessly stroked one hand over her short tan fur, gaze still fixed on some point near the horizon.

"Trinne." Duncan's low voice pulled the mage away from staring at the young noble.

"Hmm?" She looked expectantly at the Grey Warden.

He motioned for her to sit near him. "Let me take care of your arm."

"Oh, that. Please do." She plopped down next to him with alacrity, casting one last glance at the young noble before she gave Duncan her full attention.

The Grey Warden gingerly unwrapped the makeshift bandage from around her arm. Trinne bit back a whimper as the half-formed scab came with the wrappings. Duncan started to push up her sleeve, and she couldn't catch the yelp in time.

"I need to see the wound to clean it properly, Trinne," he informed her gently when she instinctively yanked her arm away.

"Can you just cut the sleeve off?" Trinne muttered, fighting back tears as her arm throbbed in time to her heartbeat. "Not like I was gonna keep these robes anyway, what with all the blood." She left unsaid that her doing so would be as much for Cousland's sake as her own. Most of the blood
staining her robes was his father's, and she figured any sane human being would rather not see that every time he looked at his fellow recruit.

"Very well," Duncan nodded after a bare moment's hesitation. Out came his dagger and the blade easily slashed through cloth, cutting off the sleeve halfway between her elbow and shoulder.

The wounds looked even uglier than Trinne had expected, which was saying something, given that she had a habit of blowing things out of proportion. But this... the entry and exit wounds from the arrow were an angry shade of scarlet, dark red blood seeping from both, and the skin in between was an only-slightly fainter shade of purplish red.

Duncan swore under his breath. "There must be a piece of the arrow still in there. It might be small, but the wound could still begin to fester rather quickly."

Not what I wanted to hear right now... "Well, can't you do something?" Trinne asked, trying hard not to panic. Fester...ing would be bad. Very, very bad.

He nodded. "In fact I must. If this is not attended to before we reach Ostagar, it will get much worse. And quickly."

"This is gonna involve your dagger diggin' around inside my arm, isn't it?" she groaned.

"Unless you would prefer I simply slice open the arrow's path, yes."

That sounded even less appealing and more painful. Bloody wonderful options here... "I think I'll go with option A." Already tensing in anticipation of how much this was going to hurt, Trinne held out her arm for Duncan to do what he had to.

"I will do my best to be swift," he promised, one hand curving under the mage's arm.

"So is this 'battlefield surgery' thing gonna become a norm?" Trinne asked, more to distract herself than out of any real curiosity.

"For Grey Wardens, you mean? Yes, it does happen. Sometimes you are fortunate and there is a mage present with healing abilities, which makes it not so bad." The tip of the dagger slipped in and Duncan tightened his grip to keep her instinctive flinch from doing more harm. "Other times are more like this."

"Do me... a favor," Trinne muttered between clenched teeth. "Remind me to learn some healing spells at the first opportunity, yeah?"

The Grey Warden chuckled, intent upon his task. "Of course." One more quick, probing twist of his dagger, and the end of a narrow splinter showed itself. He swiftly and carefully plucked it out and staunched the blood that sprung up in its wake. He then pulled a healing salve and clean bandages from his pack, smearing the whitish salve liberally on the twin wounds before gently wrapping the bandages around Trinne's arm.

"That has both a numbing agent and something to prevent festering, as much as is possible, in it," he explained as Trinne wiggled her fingers. "It should do the trick until Ostagar at the very least."

"Thanks. The urge to scratch at the bandage was overwhelming, but she knew that would defeat the purpose of Duncan cleaning the wounds out in the first place.

Trinne hesitated a moment, rubbing her hand over the bandages, before she spoke up. "Can... Can I ask you something, Duncan?"
He nodded. "Of course."

"What made you want to recruit him so badly?" she all but demanded, glancing at the younger rogue, who was still absently petting his dog and staring at nothing.

Duncan sighed. "Trinne..."

"I know, I know, there's more to people than meets the eye sometimes and all that, but I'm really not seein' what makes him so special."

The Grey Warden gave her an enigmatic smile. "If circumstances are what I believe them to be, you will see once we reach Ostagar. Or, not long after."

Trinne huffed in annoyance. "You aren't gonna tell me, are you?"

"Not more than that, no," he chuckled. "I've found disbelief is best remedied by a chance to see with your own eyes. I could tell you he's a more skilled fighter than you might think, that I believe he could more than hold his own in combat. But I think you'll find it easier to believe if you actually see it."

She groaned and let out a sigh. "Fine. I'm gonna go change, then. These robes are a mess, and they're starting to smell."

Duncan smiled. "Very well. Get some rest, I don't believe we'll be staying here long."

Trinne nodded. "Good. These woods give me the creeps." She made a beeline for where she'd left her pack, sagging against a tree near the log Cousland was sitting on. She glanced at the young noble as she collected the limp backpack. You should say something, part of her mind prompted. He just lost both his parents and it's sort of your fault. 'Sides, you know what it feels like to have everything you love ripped away from you so abruptly. Even if it's just an I'm sorry, say something. Fine, fine... Trinne sighed as she flung one of the pack's straps over her shoulder. "Hey, Cousland?"

He looked at her wearily, as if just the effort of concentrating on something was more than he wanted to do at the moment.

"I'm sorry," the mage mumbled, truly meaning it but more than a little uncomfortable with the rogue's almost painfully blank expression. She knew that, even with all she'd lost, she couldn't begin to comprehend how much this must've hurt. She wasn't even sure what she was apologizing for. What he'd lost? That she'd been a dummy and never paid attention in Wynne's class? All of the above? Whichever it was, he didn't ask for clarification, so she just cleared her throat and hurried on her way. She needed to get changed and the noble's silence was mildly unnerving, to say the least.

Probably just in shock, Trinne told herself as she searched for a decent place to change. This soon after losing so much... That's all. She shook her head at herself. Now stop worrying about it and make yourself a bit more presentable. It didn't take long for her to change; just a few seconds to summon a wisp to see by and a minute or two to make fumbling, tired fingers--half-numb on one hand from whatever Duncan had smeared on her wound--unfasten the clasps so she could work the sweaty, bloodstained thing off. Putting on the clean robes went even faster, the motions of pulling them on and doing up the clasps second nature to her after all these years. After a moment's internal debate, she hung the discarded robes over a low branch, figuring some animal would use them to line its den for winter. She didn't have any other way to dispose of them.

"After all, there's no way they're goin' in my pack," Trinne muttered. "My book'll absorb the stink
and smell to high heaven forever." Snapping her fingers to extinguish the spell wisp's light, she trudged back to where the two rogues waited. Once close enough to the others to feel safe, she followed Duncan's earlier advice, curling up with her good arm and nearly empty pack as a pillow. Whatever rest she could manage to get before they moved on would have to do.

>>X<<

Duncan woke her a few hours later, as dawn began pinking the sky. Given the happenings of her dreams, Trinne was almost grateful. It didn't take long for the three of them to collect their things and get moving, which was a good thing given how badly Duncan seemed to want to get to Ostagar. It was roughly a week's travel walking as they were, and the Warden seemed anxious that it be no longer than that. It was as if he could sense something amiss in the very air. That notion was disturbing enough Trinne resolved not to think about it the moment it entered her head. She distracted herself by chattering away, mostly aimed at Duncan, but perfectly happy switching to the mabari when the Warden's attention drifted. Cousland she'd decided to, well, ignore for the time being, give him time to come to terms with what had happened. He seemed apathetic enough about life in general and her and Duncan in particular, she didn't think he'd care.

The journey was uneventful enough, to the point of being boring, until the day Duncan pointed to a not-very-distant spire rising into the clouds and informed his recruits that it was the Tower of Ishal, which meant they were less than a day away from the ancient fortress and the encampment there.

"Good," Trinne laughed, absently rubbing her hand over her still-healing wound. "I'm dying to get this properly seen to." She blushed when she realized how her comment must have sounded to Duncan. "I mean, I am grateful for your help, and you did an excellent job; it hasn't even really bothered me that much, but nothin' beats healing magic."

The Grey Warden chuckled. "No offense was taken, Trinne. I knew what you meant."

"Heh, thanks," she mumbled, before gesturing at the sprawling encampment. "So, where in all this are we going?"

"Well, what few Grey Wardens there are in Ferelden have all assembled, so I am certain we'll have a place, but I was to meet them here with what recruits I managed to find."

"In other words, you don't exactly know?" Trinne teased.

Duncan was denied a reply to her good-natured ribbing as a young man with a wide smile and hair the same shade of gold as his armor strode toward them. "Ho there, Duncan! Finally decide to join us, did you?" he laughed.

Duncan looked more then a little surprised as he greeted the younger man. "King Cailan! I didn't expect a--"

"A royal welcome?" Cailan chuckled. "I was beginning to worry you'd miss all the fun."

Trinne giggled, but Duncan merely bore the expression of one listening to a child joke about something far more serious than they could imagine. "Not if I could help it, Your Majesty."

"So I'll have the mighty Duncan at my side in battle after all. Glorious!" the young monarch crowed. "The other Wardens tell me you were delayed because you found a promising recruit or two? I take it these are them?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty, allow me to make introductions," Duncan began, but Cailan waved him off.
"There's no need to be so formal, Duncan. If we'll be shedding blood together, we can be on friendly terms, yes?" He smiled at Trinne. "Might I know your name, my lady?"

She couldn't help but smile back as she replied, "I would be Trinne, your Majesty."

His grin widened. "A lovely name for a lovely lady. And I see you are a mage. I trust you have some spells to aid us in the coming battle?"

"Do m'best," she promised, still grinning at him.

"Excellent. We have too few mages here, another is always welcome." He offered her one last, warm smile before turning his attention to her fellow recruit. "And you are Bryce's youngest, are you not?"

The rogue gave a single nod, looking very much like he wanted to have done with this conversation as quickly as possible.

Cailan gave a satisfied nod. "I thought as much. Your brother has already arrived with Highever's men, but we are still awaiting your father."

The young noble cleared his throat before informing the king, "He's... He's not coming. He died when our castle was taken."

Cailan's eyes widened in shock and horror. "Dead?" He looked over at Duncan, as if somehow knowing the older rogue would be more forthcoming with details. "Duncan, what do you know of this?"

That was the point where Trinne tuned out the conversation and knelt to baby-talk Frida. She'd been there, thank you very much, she didn't need a rehashing of the events.

After hearing what had happened, Cailan promised justice would come to Arl Howe—which the bastard more than deserved, in Trinne opinion; you didn't turn on your friends like that—and discussed a few more important things with Duncan relating to the upcoming battle before begging his leave.

"Your Majesty, where might I find Fergus?" Cousland asked, catching the mage off-guard. She'd had him pegged as not much of a talker. But then, that was a pretty important question at the moment.

"Unfortunately, he's currently out scouting the Wilds," Cailan replied regretfully. "But I'll make sure he knows to speak with you the moment he returns."

The rogue didn't look happy about having to wait, but there wasn't really anything to be done, so he nodded his thanks and followed Duncan and Trinne as they headed for the bridge to the encampment.

"We must be ready to perform the Joining ritual be sundown," Duncan informed Trinne. "For now, however, the two of you are free to explore the camp if you wish. When you are finished your explorations, seek out Alistair. He is the junior member of our order and will help you with your preparations."

Trinne nodded. "Got it. C'mon, Cousland. I guess we should at least stick together til we know where we're goin'." She motioned for the rogue to follow her, but didn't really pay attention to whether he did or not as she crossed the bridge, too curious about what lay ahead to truly care.
Separate Ways

Chapter Notes

Alex wrote Harvey's POV again in this chapter.

The was so much to see. Trinne was almost dizzied by all of it.

I don't even know where to begin, the mage confessed to herself. Simply because it was there, she followed the winding path as it meandered between brightly colored tents, groups of soldiers playing cards, and a Chantry Sister blessing a huddle of kneeling men. She was finally distracted from gawping at her surroundings when she spied the kennels that housed the mabari. Suddenly with a specific goal, she veered sideways off the path. She didn't even care whether or not Cousland stuck with her; she just wanted to see the mabari.

As the two drew closer, she could hear the kennel master muttering to himself while he leaned over the wooden fence penning the animals in. "This isn't good. I'd hate to waste such a promising member of the breed..." He noticed his visitors and nodded a greeting. "G'day ser, m'lady. Say... are you the new Wardens? I could use some help."

"Yep, that's us," Trinne replied cheerily, while her rather morose shadow simply shrugged. "Why's us bein' Wardens matter?"

"This fella's owner died in the last battle, and the poor hound swallowed darkspawn blood," the kennel master explained. "I have medicine that might help, but I need him muzzled first. You bein' Grey Wardens, you're immune to the taint, or soon will be. The most you'd have to worry about is tooth marks."

Oh, great. My arm hasn't suffered enough abuse as it is... Trinne thought, absently rubbing her arrow wound. An idea occurred to her, hopefully one with two-fold benefits. "Hey, Cousland, you know how to handle mabari, right? Bet you could help."

The rogue made a face. "I'll pass."

Trinne huffed in a mix of disbelief and annoyance. So much for my plan to maybe help him cheer up a little... "How come?"

Cousland shrugged. "Just don't want to. I like my limbs as they are, thanks."

"What if it was Frida?" She crossed her arms and glared at him. "You'd wanna help her."

"But it's not, and this wouldn't be a good idea, so I'll. Pass."

"Fine, be that way," the mage sniped, more than a little put out that her attempt to be more friendly was so easily dismissed. She turned back to the kennel master. "I apologize for him. But I'll give it a shot."

"Excellent," the man replied, looking relieved. "Go into the pen and let him smell you. We'll know right away if this'll work. I hope it does. I'd really hate to put him down."
Trinne glanced at the hound in question as she held out her hand for the muzzle. Soulful brown eyes looked back at her, and she couldn't help but agree with the kennel master.

"Hey, boy," she crooned as she approached the bristling grey beast. "I'm here to help you."

The dog stared at her for a few seconds, and then back down from his aggressive stance. He whined softly, eyes full of pain alongside his breed's fabled intelligence.

Trinne edged closer slowly, not wanting to scare him, and scratched between the animal's ears as she slipped the muzzle on. "Who's a good dog?" she whispered when he growled weakly at her, continuing to scratch. He whimpered plaintively as she backed off. "Don't worry, boy. We'll make you better." She turned to the kennel master. "You can do that, right?"

The man shrugged helplessly. "I'll do my best, but it's no easy task. Come to think of it, are you heading into the Wilds anytime soon?"

"Maybe, why?" Trinne asked, raking her hair out of her eyes.

"There's a flower that grows in the swamps that might help improve his chances," he elaborated. "All white, with a blood red center."

"I'll see if I can find it," she promised. "If I get a chance."

"Good." The kennel master nodded appreciatively. "In the meantime, I'll begin treating our poor friend here."

"Good luck," Trinne offered sincerely as she and Cousland moved on. It wasn't too long before the rogue dropped far enough behind her excitement-fueled wanderings that she lost him.

She couldn't honestly say she minded much.

>>>X<<<

Protected by a sturdy wooden wall on one side and the abyss of mountains on the other, the Ostagar Camp admittedly possessed a considerable strategic advantage that any other day Harvey might've found noteworthy, or even impressive, as much as he'd have found the view outstretching before him magnificent. At the moment, however, he didn't care about any of that - he just needed a place to think, and the mostly abandoned terrace seemed like a good place to do so.

Not without relief, he let his fellow warden recruit wander off earlier, choosing not to follow when she hastily left in the direction of what seemed like mage quarters. After the King's disappointing news of the older Cousland's whereabouts, the rogue felt like he needed time to clear his head, and the girl's irksome enthusiasm had suddenly become suffocating.

The rogue leaned over the railing, stubbornly keeping his hood down, inviting the howling wind to temporarily deafen him. *Fergus wasn't here.* A fact he should've anticipated - soldier duties varied, and sitting in one place doing nothing was rarely a requirement. Not that he'd know from experience, he was no soldier, but he heard enough of his brother's stories to know better. At the moment, Fergus's talents were needed elsewhere, simple as that. Completely reasonable. And a great warrior he was, he could more than take care of himself. He always did.

*Fergus wasn't here.* Despite the monotonous chant Harvey tried to reassure himself with, the truth was that he had counted on something completely opposite, he *needed* something completely opposite. The absence filled him with dread, sending words he meant for his brother spinning aimlessly in his head, ready to be spoken, but not getting their promised chance. *We're going to miss
each other, he knew that with terrifying certainty. He couldn't count on Duncan to keep this particular end of the bargain, no matter what the Grey Warden's intentions were. The news of Highever Castle's fate had spread already, out in the open and out of the younger Cousland's hands. With King Cailan informed, and the duty to act as a news-bearer no longer a leverage, Harvey was off on his merry way to join the Grey Wardens, with or without seeing his brother first.

He had no idea why he was so foolish as to hope he'd be given this one thing.

For a short, desperate moment, Harvey considered simply sneaking out behind Duncan's back, trailing after his brother into the Kocari Wilds. Because why not? It's not like he had a string attached to his arm, the senior Grey Warden holding tightly to the other end. With all the commotion, who'd spare men to chase after a sole recruit?

The thought was indeed entertaining. Annoyed, Harvey grabbed a small piece of rubble, and threw it far over the edge, watching it disappear somewhere in between the rocks below. Because Bryce Cousland's son wasn't a deserter, and that would be the only fate awaiting him, whether he'd reach Fergus or not. His father protected him by giving his own word, and it mattered as much as Harvey's need to see his older brother. He sighed. Also, the image of Fergus finding him dangling from a tree somewhere upon his return had significantly abated his zeal.

Fergus wasn't here.

The young noble leaned a little further over the railing, and finally the joined efforts of sound and cold air caused ringing in his left ear to become painful. He endured it for a few moments, and then gave up, pulling back just before it became unbearable. He reluctantly turned away from the edge of the balcony, fingers trying to rub away the splitting ache. Way to clear your head, he thought with a hint of disappointment. This wasn't helping.

A lone guard on his patrolling route walked by with a nonchalant stride, and the rogue could almost feel the lingering glance that was sent his way. Realizing that he had overstayed his welcome, no matter how blissfully solitary this place seemed, and not feeling capable of long, winded explanations if the next guard happened to be more inquiring, Harvey decided it was his time to leave. He reached for the family sword, which he propped earlier against the nearest column and once again settled the familiar - and slightly comforting- weight on his back.

'Walk around the camp', Duncan said.

The way back to the main camp was shorter than he'd like....but maybe in this case not being given the time to consider his options, or rather lack thereof, was a good thing. Feeling tired, he passed a row of old columns, most of them still a support for the stone dome, while some, with the parts of the ceiling destroyed, standing there without a purpose. Harvey once again settled into not thinking, a comfortable habit he picked up after leaving Highever. It made things easier, especially dealing with how little control he had left over his own life. Focusing on simple tasks helped. And it made the prospect of laying down and staying that way less tempting. He will walk around camp. He will join the Grey Wardens. He will try not to die.

He will see his brother, if lucky.

>>X<<

Wind was blasted annoying. Of all the things she was having to readjust to outside the tower, that was Trinne's least favorite. She would have felt downright silly admitting it aloud, especially around Cousland, but between a life lived indoors and the relatively calm weather when she and Duncan first left the tower, she was still getting used to the wind that plagued southern Ferelden.
"It's a good thing I don't care about my hair," the mage muttered as a breeze further tousled her unruly mop. The comment was made solely for her own benefit; Cousland had lagged far enough behind after the mabari incident she'd finally lost him—*Thank the Maker*—and Duncan had gone off to "prepare things", whatever that meant, leaving Trinne freer than she'd been in her life.

Despite the list of things she'd long drempt of doing if she ever got out of the tower, her first act with her freedom was tracking down a healer. Her arm was throbbing something fierce. The soldier she asked for directions pointed her toward a canopy set up off one of the side trails that wound around the camp, and in short order Trinne was trying to catch the attention of a silver-haired mage. 

"Scuse me, I need some heal-"

"Trinne Amell! What are you doing here?" the mage interrupted, turning and looking at her with astonishment, which Trinne returned.

"Wynne?!" Of all the people she'd idly wondered about encountering here, she'd never even considered the kindly Senior Enchanter. "I... got recruited. I'm a Grey Warden now. Or, well, will be," she amended. "But right now I need some healing. Duncan and I were at Castle Cousland when Howe's men attacked."

"And you turned out to be something less than invincible?" Wynne chuckled gently. "Let me see, dear."

"It's nothing really serious," Trinne explained as she sat on a wooden bench and rolled up her sleeve. "Just some archer who got in a lucky shot..."

"I see," the older mage murmured, peeling off the bandages that covered the wound. "Still, that looks like it hurts. Hold still and I'll see what I can do."

Trinne obeyed, doing her best not to squirm as the pale blue magic circled her arm and she felt it knitting flesh and muscle back together from the inside out. "D'you think you could maybe teach me some healing spells, Wynne? Just simple stuff," she added hastily when the woman gave her a questioning look. "I don't need to know how to bring people back from the dead or anything, but the basic stuff like this—" she nodded toward her arm—"I should probably know how to fix."

"Finally ready to pay attention, are you?" Wynne smiled.

Trinne rolled her eyes. "Yes. I know, I know. But if I'm gonna be a Grey Warden, I'm gonna need to know how to heal."

"Yes, that will be most helpful," Wynne nodded. "But a Grey Warden? When did this happen?"

"Just recently. Right after my Harrowing. Pretty awesome, right?" Trinne smirked.

Wynne paused before replying, as if choosing her words carefully. "I'm happy for you, but, Trinne, you do realize you'll have responsibilities; it's not all fun and games."

"Yeah, I know," the younger mage shrugged. "But after we win here, and defeat the Blight an' everything, I get to live outside the tower, without templars watching over my shoulder to make sure I'm not a blood mage or a demon or whatever." She bit back a wince as she thought of Jowan; instantly wishing she hadn't gone there. It still hurt to think about.

Fortunately, Wynne thought the wince was due to pain, and murmured an apology. "I'm almost done. You do know this battle may prove more challenging than you're expecting, I hope."

Trinne rolled her eyes, grateful for something else to think about all the same. "Don't be such a
pessimist! King Cailan says the battle's as good as won. And after we vanquish the darkspawn, I don't have to go back to the tower. Ever. " She grinned in anticipation. "I can't wait..."

Wynne sighed. "Hold still. I can't finish if you keep moving," she chided.

"Sorry." Trinne froze again, tapping her foot impatiently until the older mage was done. "Thanks. That's much better," she said gratefully, examining her arm. "Wow, there isn't even a scar."

Wynne nodded. "That's usually the case with less severe injuries. Had it been deeper, there might be some scarring left behind."

"Got it," the younger mage replied. "Now, about those healing spells?"

"Of course, dear," Wynne chuckled. "Pay attention, because you have to do this just right for them to work properly..."

>>X<<

He really did try.

Reaching a spacious stone niche - a makeshift shooting range set between balconies and the main part of the camp, Harvey hesitated, weighing his chances of not getting hit by a stray arrow. As projectiles pierced the air with a quiet hum - a row of archers making sense of their bows and quivers, he reluctantly decided to wait at least till the end of the volley.

Also, he felt no rush. The rogue still considered having his ear blown off a nicer perspective than wandering purposelessly around encampment, especially since the colorful tents showing between the stone columns brought the promise of noise and people and claustrophobia he didn't want to deal with. Still, he needed to prepare himself for the infamous Joining, whatever that might be. He had little choice.

Till now, he'd been focused solely on meeting Fergus, and when that turned out to be impossible, his mind started to timidly remind him of his new - and unexpected - duties. It left Harvey a little bit at loss - he didn't care much for the Grey Wardens, thankful for saving his life as he might be. But with his home under siege, fire and smoke, and dozens of Howe's men running around, I could have sneaked out of the Castle on my own, like I've done a hundred of times before.

The young noble caught himself and squashed the ungrateful thought in time, knowing very well where it was coming from. You could've escaped, or maybe not. You could've simply died there.

He was starting to make excuses, like he always did when trying to figure out a way out of some mess. A way that, for one, in this case wasn't even there - he could try squirming like a trapped eel, there was no one to lift the Right of Conscription, not Fergus, not the King himself. And two, he should possess enough decency not to try. Bryce Cousland gave his word, and Harvey was set on keeping it, even if he'd rather run away. Even if according to the bargain Mother should be here with me. Harvey sighed heavily. Just be thankful to be alive.

The thought didn't carry as much weight as he'd like, but it had to be enough.

He didn't know much about Grey Wardens, nor he was ever interested in finding out more - heroes of legend, who fell out of grace and got banished from Ferelden, and who then returned decades later by winning back the king's favor. That was the gist of it, and almost everything he could scrape from long faded lectures with Aldous, things he might've heard or read a long time ago. True, the mage girl he's been traveling with has been mercilessly assaulting Duncan with questions about his Order, but Harvey couldn't honestly say he's been listening at the time.
He wasn't even sure if they met any other Wardens upon their arrival at Ostagar - he could of course try and ask around, but he banished the thought even before it fully formed. He wasn't in the mood for talking.

In the end Harvey decided it didn't matter that much, he would stick with what he knew. Wardens were a military order, battling against Darkspawn - a faded picture of a twisted, humanesque monster he may have seen in a book somewhere surfaced for a moment - so whatever the Joining entitled, there will most certainly be a lot of fighting involved, then or afterwards. Regretfully, Harvey left one of his favorite weapons behind in Highever, so that was something he had to take care of first.

Also, eating something sounded reasonable... *and* finding that Alistair fellow, if his companion didn't take care of it first.

The sudden cheer brought the rogue's attention back to the real world, making him focus again on the bow wielding soldiers. In the time he took to figure out what to do next, they'd managed to shoot all of their remaining arrows, and were now in the act of...comparing scores? One of the younger looking archers got a few laughs and a good pat on the back. Almost involuntarily, the noble's eyes searched for the young man's target. First, second, no, third shield on the left. Nothing remarkable, and it took Harvey a few seconds to realize what was the meaning of the playful outburst. Some of the boy's projectiles hit the bullseye, most of them missed, but one arrow in particular, which by a lucky accident found a bit of loose concrete between the stony blocks way over the target, embedded itself deeply into a wall. A complete miss. A funny miss.

Huh.

Fighting with a sudden cold sweat, Harvey decided to leave, almost running down the old, moss covered stairs, ducking between tents, not turning around, letting himself get swallowed by the busyness of the camp around him. *It wasn't... it wasn't funny at all.*
Alistair

From here out, unless I say otherwise, Alex wrote Harvey's POV

Harvey twirled the sharp object between his fingers, appreciating its point of balance and the surprisingly decent handiwork, considering field conditions the blacksmith probably had to deal with.

Strange, how nothing seemed like any of his concern. Not the hubbub of soldiers carrying out their daily duties, nor the palpable tension that hung in the air--anxious whispers of tonight's pending battle that seemed to keep everyone on their toes. But the weight of the dagger in his hand--it was familiar and comforting somehow. A decent weapon, one he could definitely rely on.

The quartermaster, a middle aged man with a potbelly and quite an impressive mustache, appeared to have a similar opinion. "You have a keen eye," he said, commending the rogue's choice. He knelt beside a short stump, a cloth-wrapped bundle in his right hand, and without further ado unraveled the rest of the set, fourteen shiny siblings of the steel throwing knife Harvey held in his hand. The young noble wasn't surprised by the tradesman's good mood, clients who knew what they wanted usually meant business. Most likely this very moment he was wondering how many of them Harvey was planning to buy.

Regretfully, none, the rogue thought with some deal of embarrassment. At least not with two silver coins and a couple of coppers he managed to gather from various crevices of his clothes and armor. It was hard to say why he asked to be shown this particular weapon, especially knowing very well he couldn't afford it--not even enough for one, not to mention for a whole set. Call it a useless sentiment, wishful thinking.

It was unfair to lead on the man this way, especially since he's been surprisingly polite upon hearing Harvey was a Grey Warden recruit, but... the rogue flickered his wrist, sending the dagger flying in a low loop and approved of how effortlessly it landed in his palm. Before he could stop himself, old habits took over.

"I don't have enough on me, but my father...brother is a teyrn, and he could..." The moment words left his mouth, Harvey realized his mistake. The friendly smile on quartermaster's face evaporated almost instantly, replaced by something the young Cousland identified as a jaded knowing. The expensive daggers disappeared faster than he thought possible, lost in the folds of tradesman's vast apron.

"And my aunt is the Empress of Orlais. Lad, if I had a copper every time a client offers his debt to be paid off by a rich relative, I'd've bought my own bannorn. Grey Warden or not, I'm not leading a charity here." Harvey got an impression the quartermaster wanted to be more blunt, but held back. Still, a hired mercenary guarding the whole property shifted a bit, just enough to send a clear message. In case you'll try anything funny, I have a very big sword over here. Just so you know.

Stocky hand extended in Harvey's direction, and the rogue's face darkened for a moment, a faint spark of anger for being called a liar defiantly tightening his grip an the dagger's handle. But as quickly as it came, it passed, and he felt his face burning up for quite a different reason. Looking like
an unkempt vagabond in a charred armor didn't speak in his favor, and he had no means to prove otherwise, short of marching over Duncan or King Cailan himself to validate his claim...which was a very surreal idea.

With a sigh, the young noble handed back the knife, his other hand held high in a gesture of apology. "Look, I just need a few daggers. Cheaper ones... I really do have money." He fished out and presented a silver coin to appease the quartermaster's questioning brow. It caused the tradesman's skeptical expression to ease up a bit, and he turned around to fetch some more common equipment, muttering about people wasting his bloody time. Harvey rubbed his neck in resignation. He was quickly starting to hate this place. Not an hour earlier, he's been denied the entrance to the part of the camp housing most of the army troops -and that meant Highever soldiers as well. The realization that he was probably not allowed there so as to not spread panic between his own people has been worse. This was simply a cherry on top--one that stung, but also one he could stand to ignore.

He finished the rest of his shopping avoiding smalltalk, in the end acquiring seven small iron blades--they were most likely going to break after a few throws, but he literally couldn't afford to be picky. He planned to buy at least ten of them, but upon remembering Kennel Master's words about venturing into Korcari Wilds, he decided food provisions were a better idea. Finally, a metal sharpener and a small razor also found their way into his pocket.

>>>X<<<

Wynne's lessons on healing spells were far easier to grasp than Trinne had anticipated. Apparently more had sunk in from the Senior Enchanter's classes than she'd realized.

"You're a natural at this, dear," Wynne smiled.

Trinne indulged in a self-congratulatory grin of her own. "Thanks."

"Imagine how good you could be if you'd been trying all those years."

The younger mage rolled her eyes at the gentle rebuke. "But entropy is so much more fun. Disorient and sleep spells especially."

Wynne eyed her suspiciously. "Dare I ask how you know this, young lady?"

Trinne shrugged. "No?" she tried. That simply earned her a dark look. "Lydia and Shar have no sense of when normal people like to go to sleep, so I sorta... eased them along once or twice when they were talkin' too late."

"Trinne Amell! I can't believe you would do such a thing!" Wynne shook her head in disapproval and sighed. "On second thought, I'm not really surprised. You always were one of the biggest troublemakers the Circle's ever seen."

"And proud of it," Trinne gloated, grinning at her former teacher. "But I have to take exception at 'one of'."

"Trust me, dear, you are not the worst of the hooligans that place has survived." Wynne smiled and patted her arm. "But don't you have more important things to do than listen to an old woman tell stories?"

Her gentle reminder jarred Trinne's memory, and the younger woman bolted up from their shared bench. "I guess I do... Need to find this Alistair fellow, before Duncan thinks the ground opened up and swallowed me whole."
"Best of luck to you, young lady," Wynne called after her as Trinne hurriedly abandoned the canopied area, off in search of the mysterious Warden.

She was very quickly distracted by the sights afforded by nature of the many people and brightly colored tents that surrounded her. So distracted, that she not only forgot--temporarily--about finding Alistair, but also about watching where she was going. Much as it had in Highever, this did not end well.

Unfortunately for Trinne, the young man she walked into this time was nothing like Gilmore, in terms of build and manners both. She didn't get a terribly good look at him before landing in the dirt on her rear, just a vague impression of 'tall' and 'solid'.

"Watch it!" he grumbled, and Trinne could hear in his voice the glower she missed, eyes on her dirt-streaked clothes.

"Watch it yourself," she muttered as she scrambled to her feet and brushed dust from her robes. "This isn't just my fault, y'know."

"I'm not the one with my head in the bloody clouds," he shot back. "Maker, you'd think you'd never seen the sky before..."

That was enough to snap her head up--only to find herself eye to eye with the mabari head tattooed on her new friend's bicep. The mage tipped her head back, only momentarily intimidated by the several inches of height he had on her. "Someone's in a bad mood today," she sniped.

"Someone needs to keep her eyes on where she's goin','" he retorted, crossing his arms.

"Why, is there a law?" Trinne challenged.

"Oy, Hawke!" a short man with skin like leather hailed the dark-haired warrior as he matched her glare for glare. "I thought I told you to get your arse over to the armorers. If you ain't kitted out an' at your post in an hour, I'll boot you back to your farm full o' women afore you can say Andraste's tits."

Hawke's face screwed into an even darker scowl--which Trinne wouldn't have thought possible--and he saluted the officer. "Aye, ser." Without another word to the mage, he stalked off toward the armorer's tent.

Trinne rolled her eyes behind his back and stuck out her tongue. "Good riddance," she muttered as she resumed her search for the still-elusive Alistair. Here's hoping I don't run into that arse again...

If she paid more attention to where she was going, it was certainly just to keep from missing Alistair, not because she thought Ser Scowls had any kind of point. Maker, no. That would mean admitting he was sort of right. She just wanted to find Alistair.

It really didn't help that Duncan hadn't told her what he looked like before sending her on her way. Of course, she hadn't thought to ask either, but Trinne was in the mood to blame Duncan. She figured Alistair was around her age, roughly, but that wasn't much to go on.

"Alright, I'm gonna need some help here..." Trinne muttered to the sky, nearly tripping over an uneven paving stone as she did. "Bloody- I get the point. Eyes on where I'm going..." Her head swiveled back and forth between the lines of tents and pavilions that surrounded the main path, just about ready to give up and ask someone if they could help her track him down.

Then she heard it. "Haven't Grey Wardens asked more than enough of the Circle?"
Ah! That's promising! Trinne spun toward the harried voice, hoping the Grey Warden its owner was addressing would be the one she was looking for.

The splintmail-clad blond facing the irate mage gestured a good-natured apology for imposing on his time. "I simply came to deliver a message from the Revered Mother, ser mage. She desires your presence."

The red-robed mage snorted and made a dismissive gesture. "What her Reverence desires is of no concern to me. I am busy helping the Grey Wardens--by the king's orders, I might add!"

The blond sighed and quirked an impish grin at the man. "Should I have asked her to write a note?"

The mage scowled. "Tell her I will not be harassed in this manner!"

"Yes, I was harassing you by delivering a message," Blondie drawled.

Trinne smirked. *I might like you.*

"Your glibness does you no credit," the mage glared.

"And here I thought we were getting along so well!" the warrior grinned. "I was even going to name one of my children after you--the grumpy one."

The mage threw up his hands in disgusted surrender. "Enough! I will speak to the woman if I must. Get out of my way, fool!" He stormed off, brushing past Trinne as if she were invisible.

The blond watched him go before seeming to notice her. "Y'know, one good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together."

Trinne cocked her head and shot him a questioning look. "Huh?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just trying to find a bright side to this mess. You can ignore me. Most people do. I'm Alistair, the newest Grey Warden. You must be the recruit Duncan told me about..."

Alistair frowned. "Though, come to think of it, weren't there supposed to be two of you?"

*Drat. He knows. I'm so not telling him I lost Cousland...* "Yeah, but don't worry. He'll definitely catch up," Trinne replied. "I'm Trinne, by the way. Trinne Amell."

"Nice to meet you," Alistair nodded, giving her a once-over. "You...wouldn't happen to be a mage, would you?"

Trinne sighed in exasperation. "What exposed my secret? The sunshine-yellow robes, or the blatantly obvious staff?" she snarked.

"Both?" the warrior tried hesitantly.

"You look like that's gonna be a problem," Trinne sniped, brow furrowing. "Duncan made it sound like the Grey Wardens were better than a bunch of bloody prejudiced templars!" she spat, any potential camaraderie with this blond warrior evaporating.

"What?! No, no, no! Maker, I did not mean to give that impression at all!" Alistair insisted, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. He paused, rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Though, actually, I am a templar. Sort of. But not technically. Didn't quite get to the vows before I was recruited..."
Trinne just stood there, half longing for the ground to swallow her up. First Cousland, and now a templar?! Maker, please tell me this is some cruel joke. Or a dream. I haven't woke up from my Harrowing yet and all of this is one long crazy dream that I'll laugh about with Jowan in the morning...

The thought of her best friend brought with it the stab of remembered betrayal that hurt too much to be anything but real. Trinnie abruptly did an about-face. "C'mon, let's go find Cousland and get on with this ritual thing."

"But you just said he was gonna catch up," Alistair protested in confusion.

"Well, yeah, eventually he would, sure. But excuse me for wanting to be done with this as soon as possible," Trinnie shot back. "I think it would be best if we split up to look for him."

"Ouch. Okay, point taken," Alistair sighed. "So, who am I looking for?"

"Um, right." She nibbled her lower lip as she tried to decide how to describe the young noble to the templar. "He's around my age, maybe... this tall-" she held a hand a couple inches above her head-"black hair, wears lighter weight leather armor..."

"Ah, Trinne," Alistair began hesitantly, as if unsure of either her name or how she was going to take his reply. Maybe both. "Not to be difficult, but that description fits a large portion of the army here."

The mage snorted. "Well, you could always try following the general trail of callousness, might find him that way," she muttered, still stewing about the rogue's attitude regarding the mabari.

"Huh?" Alistair cocked his head in confusion.

"Nothing," Trinne brushed him off. Though, seriously, I don't think I've seen him cry once since we left Highever. But it's not my fault he has such a forgettable face... Oh! "He, um, has a big nose. And I mean big. Practically like a bird's beak or something." Part of her felt bad for exaggerating like this, but the majority of her was still pissed at Cousland for, well, being him and didn't care.

The...enhanced description didn't seem to help Alistair any; he still looked confused.

Trinne sighed and resumed chewing her lower lip as she tried to think of other descriptors to apply to Cousland. Given his sullen silence since they'd left the castle, she'd largely ignored him, which was back to bite her in the ass now. She was saved from the task, however, when she spied a vaguely familiar green cloak out of the corner of her eye. Turning to verify she wasn't seeing things yielded a unique mix of relief and reluctance because it was indeed him. "Oh, never mind. That's him over there." She gestured for Alistair to follow her but didn't looked back as she beelined for her fellow recruit.

>>X<<

Alistair dutifully trailed behind the mage as she headed toward the other recruit. He wasn't entirely sure what to think about this girl. On the one hand, she'd seemed friendly enough before learning he was a templar. On the other hand, she didn't seem very inclined to trust him as far as she could spit now that she did know. She came across as energetic and cheery, but didn't seem too fond of the rogue--between the man's build and the daggers tucked in his belt, Alistair felt the assumption was a safe one--Duncan had recruited along with her. One thing's for sure, the warrior decided, life certainly won't be dull with her around. Assuming she makes it. Andraste, I hope she makes it...

>>X<<
Completely oblivious to the warrior's chain of thought, Trinne continued toward Cousland, planning to get close enough to tap him on the shoulder and see if she could catch him off-guard. The rogue foiled her plan, turning just enough to catch sight of her when she was still too far away to implement her plan. Her silent curse seemed to be echoed in his eyes for the briefest second before the emotionless, numb expression that practically had her wondering if non-mages could be made Tranquil after all returned. Trinne felt a shudder that had nothing to do with Cousland and *everything* to do with... *someone else* run down her spine and hoped that neither of the men had noticed it.

"Hey, Cousland, you ready to find Duncan an' get on with things?" she barked, the almost-memory making her tone sharper than she'd intended.

He simply shrugged, which she took as assent.

"Well, then," Trinne looked back at Alistair. "I'm assuming you know where we can find him?"

"What? Oh, right," Alistair nodded. "The Grey Wardens are set up in the east part of the camp. He's probably waiting for you there."

"Well, then, enough dilly-dallying, let's go." Raking her hair out of her eyes, the mage pointing herself in the general direction he'd indicated and started walking.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes that was Carver. :3
Walk in the Park

Things were finally looking up.

That was the only way Trinne could think to describe the turn of events that occurred after finding Alistair. After sticking her with Cousland and an ex-templar, the Maker had finally seen fit to show her a kindness when they returned to Duncan and met the other new recruits. Ser Jory was polite enough, if a tad, well, *boring*, but Daveth...

The mage smirked to herself. Daveth was *fun*. The wink he'd slipped in alongside his greeting had perk ed her up considerably. The two of them traded teasing flirtations the whole way out to the Wilds, and the archer's light-hearted and thoroughly upbeat outlook on the whole exercise was both a refreshing change from Cousland's gloomy silence and similar enough to her own that Trinne rejoiced in having a kindred spirit.

"Here, mage, this is the flower you were lookin' for, innit?" the subject of her thoughts called out, motioning to the spindly stalked plant just off the path.

"Let me see..." Trinne murmured, stepping past Alistair and Jory to get a better look. She'd told Daveth about the flower the kennel master needed in order to cure the sick mabari, and he'd promised to keep an eye out. The mage ran her fingers over the mostly-white petals, trailing toward the blood-red center. "It looks right to me," she grinned. "Thanks for keepin' an eye out."

"It was my pleasure, m'lady," Daveth replied with a matching grin. "Allow me." He carefully uprooted the plant, gingerly coiling it a bit to place the whole thing in one of his belt pouches. Even as he did so, Trinne noticed Alistair tense.

"Quiet down, there's darkspawn nearby," he warned, hand going to his sword.

Immediately, archer and mage ceased their bantering. The junior Warden had only just finished explaining mere seconds earlier about the order's ability to sense darkspawn, soothing Jory's ruffled feathers when the knight all but panicked at the injured scout's report of the monsters. Trinne had laughed more than she should've at Daveth's crack about them at least being warned before dying. Ser Jory's attitude on the whole was simply a mark against him, far as she was concerned. So she wasn't really surprised when Daveth suggested splitting up and the big man immediately tried to shoot it down.

"If we do that, whoever doesn't have the Grey Warden is going to be left to fend for themselves against darkspawn," he protested.

"Don't worry, Alistair can stay with you if it makes you feel better," Trinne ribbed. "But unless he can use his Warden sense to tell us right where they are, we'll find 'em faster if we split up."

"Actually..." Alistair coughed. "I can. Straight ahead."

"Oh. Well then I'm right behind you armored types," she conceded with a grin, elbowing Daveth in the ribs when he laughed at her blush. "Shut it."

"Yes, milady," he teased, and Trinne was fairly certain she saw Cousland's scowl deepen at their renewed banter.

*What's his problem now?* She rolled her eyes. The rogue probably thought she and Daveth weren't taking this seriously enough. *Just 'cause I'm willing to crack a smile... No, Trinne, just ignore him.*
Alistair and Jory were already moving toward where the former had sensed the darkspawn anyway, which gave her something more important to focus on for now.

>>X<<

Her first glimpse of darkspawn was somewhat disjointed, glances of bared fangs and glinting eyes over Alistair's shoulder.

Daveth shot a look at her as he pulled another arrow out of his quiver. "You doin' alright?"

Trinne squeaked and instinctively dodged toward him as a darkspawn arrow thudded into the ground next to her foot. "Yep. I've seen worse."

The thief raised an eyebrow. "Not the reaction I expected, given the reputation darkspawn have."

She shrugged, hurling a lightning bolt at the short darkspawn that nearly got her. "Sure they're scary and creepy, but they're nothing compared to demons."

Daveth laughed. "Well, that's one way to look at it."

"Seriously, from what I can see, sloth demons have them beat."

"I'm sure the distance helps," he teased.

Trinne coughed sheepishly. "There is that, yeah." She pulled a disgusted face as Jory decapitated one of the taller darkspawn, creating an opening that Cousland exploited to go after the archers. For all his sullen attitude got on her nerves, she had to admit the noble at least had an idea what he was doing. Made her wonder how much he'd practiced his not entirely aboveboard fighting style.

"Trinne, I'll bet I can peg that middle one between the eyes from here," Daveth grinned.

"Yeah? Bet I can hit the one behind him first," she challenged.

"Considerin' how wide that last try went... You're. On," the archer smirked. "Loser owes the winner a kiss."

"Have trouble seein' how that makes either of us a loser," Trinne laughed, lightning sparking between her fingers.

"Exactly." Daveth smirked, nocking another arrow.

"Then deal." She exhaled a steadying breath, ignoring everything around her in favor of making this spell count. Of course, the difference between winning and losing this bet was simply simply a matter of pride; the results otherwise were pretty much the same.

It turned out to be for nothing, Daveth's arrow drilled in between the short darkspawn's eyes a few heartbeats before Trinne's lightning slammed into her target.

"Dammit," she hissed under her breath, grinning all the same as the thief crowed in triumph.

"Hah! Pay up, Lovely," Daveth chuckled at her chagrined expression.

"Now?!" Trinne cocked an eyebrow at the sound of ongoing combat.
"Only if y' don't want an audience," he pointed out.

"Ah, fine," the mage sighed, feigning reluctance. "Say please."

"Please pay up, my lady," the archer grinned.

Trinne obliged. Her free hand snagged the collar of his armor to tug him down to her level and she pressed a lightning-fast kiss against his lips.

Daveth's eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "I'd been thinkin' peck on the cheek, but this works too..."

The mage rolled her eyes and blushed. "Now you tell me." She spun back to the fight before he could reply, frowning as she surveyed the hill. "Hey, where... where'd Cousland go?"

The archer's eyes narrowed as he scanned the field of combat. Alistair and Jory had finished off the other of the taller darkspawn and were charging toward the remaining short darkspawn. "I dunno."

Trinne sighed. "I'll go look for him. You stick with them; tell 'em where I went?"

"Sure thing, doll." Daveth nodded and headed up the hill as Trinne turned her attention to finding their missing recruit.

>>>X<<<

They were ugly, and reeked of something Harvey couldn't quite place. Disease, rot, mold...the stench alone would have helped to keep him at bay, if the fact that he was facing a snarling, armor-clad monster wasn't enough.

He frantically dodged, rusty blade missing his head by inches and embedding itself deep in the bark of an unlucky tree. Losing impetus, the darkspawn took a moment to free its weapon, a moment rogue used to leave a long gash on the monster's unprotected forearm.

Black bile befouled the forest floor. Completely shrugging it off, the beast charged back at the noble, its tenacity unchanged.

Harvey grimaced, not even trying to parry the blow of an opponent almost twice his size. A slide to the left put a little more shrubbery between him and certain evisceration. He was quite sure his dagger managed to cut through tendons. Or at least, it should have. The creature already bled from a dozen cuts like the one he just dealt, but all his efforts so far managed to only irritate the monster.

I'm a fly he's trying to squash, he thought with fake humor, trying to keep the rising panic away at all cost. Darkspawn were ugly and vicious, but they weren't invincible. Ser Jory managed to decapitate one, before they got separated.

The memory made Harvey feel a little bit better. He had to keep a cool head. Lose that, and lose everything.

Thankfully, it seemed darkspawn were also not that smart. The creature Alistair called a hurlock took another a swing with its greatsword, ignoring the fact that it wasn't working, and aimed at the rogue's right shoulder. Harvey side-stepped, again using a nearby tree as a shield. Splinters flew in the air, one of them hitting his cheek and leaving a bloody trail.

He was aware of the ineffectiveness of such tactic. Initially, he wanted to wait the creature out, counting on exertion to take its toll, and then finish the fight. But in result, the sweat was starting to
flood his eyes and the darkspawn was still as fresh as a daisy, shallow wounds or not. Who knew these creatures were so...resilient.

He couldn't afford to drag it any longer, so far he was the only one losing his breath.

Alright, all or nothing then.

Changing plans, Harvey threw away his left dagger, quickly exchanging it with a throwing knife, hand tightening on a familiar handle. Incised wounds weren't enough, he had to slow down his opponent, to even think about winning. Or more realistically, he realized, about running away.

Still counting on speed, Harvey left his cover and met the darkspawn head on. He feigned an attack, aiming for fissures in the armor between neck and shoulder, knowing very well that reaching them with a dagger up front was unlikely, and with a throwing knife nearly impossible. When he was close enough for the sword to cut him in half the rogue let his foot slip, sliding onto a cold ground.

With a roar of triumph, hurlock raised the blade vertically to finish him off.

What Harvey was waiting for.

He lunged between the creature's parted legs, the empty thud of the sword connecting with the ground behind him sending shivers down his spine, and with all his strength aimed the small blade behind the creature's right knee, where the metal elements with connected only with a few pieces of leather.

There was a howl of pain, a first sign of weakness from his opponent since the fight started, and Harvey couldn't help but smirk.

A crackling sound filled the air, sudden white light blinding the rogue completely. Still not entirely on his feet, he toppled over, this time for real. Disorientation, slight prickling in his left hand- he tried taking a deep breath, but gagged on a stench of burned flesh. Is that what dying feels like? Cursing silently he never saw the creature's allies coming, Harvey waited for the last blow.

Which never came.

"Ha, piece of cake!" Cocky words and light footsteps coming his way weren't what he was expecting, so it took a few seconds before he realized what was going on. The mage girl. He would feel relieved, if the overwhelming urge to vomit didn't occupy his mind at the moment. He crawled two feet away from what he presumed was his opponent's smoking corpse and finally relieved his stomach, greedily swallowing big gulps of air.

"Uh... you alright?" She asked. There was a slight concern in her voice... Maybe.

Harvey forced his eyes to open and close a few times, trying to banish dark spots dancing around his field of vision. Trinne was standing some distance away as to give him a little privacy, or more likely--judging from her expression--because of simple distaste.

Annoyed and a little humiliated rogue rose to his feet, ignoring the wave of dizziness. "It's called giving someone a heads up." His voice was still coarse, but he didn't care. "You could've hit me."

He looked at the dead hurlock, in whose case wearing a fullbody metal armor didn't help at all, no. Not where lightning was concerned.

Hands on her hips, the girl took a moment from admiring her handiwork and eyed her companion critically from head to toe. "Only your shoulder guard is a bit grazed, don't be such a baby. I saved your arse."
My shoulder guard? At last he noticed it, the left one was blackened, the leather cracked under the influence of heat. He recalled prickling. Dumbfounded, cold sweat dancing on his back, he opened his mouth.

"Nnngh," Harvey protested weakly.

But she was already leaving, saying something about the others wondering where they were.

"You could have hit me!" He shouted behind her with protest, but the girl only waved at him to hurry up. There was a playful skip in her steps.

Speechless, Harvey loitered behind a little bit longer to find the thrown-away dagger, pondering on children playing with weapons and carefully avoiding looking at the dead monster. He wondered whether he'd have to deal with the mage after the Joining was done.

>>X<<

By the time they rejoined the others, the men had made certain all the darkspawn were dead, and Daveth was in the middle of searching the bodies; Trinne assumed for anything valuable. While she doubted darkspawn carried anything of real value, old habits probably died hard--especially when they were what kept you alive. Her eyebrows quirked, however, when the rogue slashed open the darkspawn's neck and caught some of the blood that gushed out in a small glass vial which he passed to Jory. Fortunately, Duncan instructions--only half heard the first time as she was side-eying Daveth--played through her brain before she could open her mouth and make a fool of herself.

You need four vials of blood, one for each recruit...

"So, what do we need that for, anyway?" she asked instead, crossing her arm and shooting Alistair a quizzical look.

"I... can't tell you," the blond shrugged apologetically. "Not yet, anyway."

She huffed in annoyance, blowing her bangs out of her face. "Why not?"

"Because Grey Wardens love their secrets, and this one needs to be kept a little longer." There was a look in his eyes that said he could be just as stubborn about this as she could.

Badly as she wanted to argue the point and get him to tell her something, a little voice inside persuaded her to drop it. After all, the faster they finished here, the faster they could get back to camp and she could get an answer. So the mage simply huffed again and rolled her eyes. "Fine. Lead on then, pretty boy."

Alistair looked like he wanted to protest the label, but resisted the urge and simply motioned down the hill. "We need to keep going. The Warden tower is further south. And keep an eye out; they aren't close by any means, but there are darkspawn out there."

The group automatically fell in line behind the blond warrior.

"You're the one who knows where we're going, mate," Daveth pointed out when the Warden arched an eyebrow at their formation. There wasn't really a way to argue with that, and Alistair sighed his concession as he headed down the hill.

>>X<<

It was as the group made their way through a particularly overgrown section of formerly-clear path
that Harvey's boot accidentally connected with a mid sized metal object. Curious, he fished it out from its thick bed of leaves and turned it a few times in his hands. His findings made him hesitate a few seconds, until a low grunt reminded him he was blocking what remained of the path for those behind. Resuming his previous steady pace, the rogue conquered the last few feet of thick vegetation and joined Alistair in a small clearing, Jory trailing not far behind. There was a sharp exclamation of dismay and Trinne and Daveth remained hidden by the undergrowth as the lanky archer helped to free robes snagged on thorny branches. A few saucy curses sliced the air, their intensity arching Harvey's brow and making Alistair cough nervously.

"Well, at least we don't need heralds with horns announcing our arrival," the warrior shrugged good-naturedly. "And there are no darkspawn around, I can assure you," he added quickly, noticing the sour expressions.

Harvey held his discovery tightly. "Do your amazing powers include sensing creatures other than darkspawn?"

The Warden scratched his chin. "Well, you caught me..."

They heard the sound of ripping cloth and a small cry of triumph as the mage—minus the bottom inch or so of her sunny yellow robes—joined the rest of the party.

"Aren't there any paths here that look more like, I don't know... paths?" she asked reproachfully.

Harvey ignored the question, patience at its limit, and presented her with the object he was still holding.

"A glove?" Trinne took and inspected the metal bracer, before swearing and throwing it away as if it burned. "There's a bloody hand in there!! D'you think that's funny?!!" She rubbed her fingers in disgust.

Not really, no.

The rotting flesh was still inside only because the sharp teeth had lost to the fitted metal. "Wolves did that, and they aren't known for their sense of humor. If we don't move, we'll end up with a whole bunch of them on our necks."

The girl huffed and crossed her arms—a usual response when she was annoyed, he'd noticed. "Well, you could've just said that, like a normal person."

"I don't think it matters anymore," the swarthy thief interposed, pointing to the other side of the clearing, where a large beast eyed them with a hefty dose of interest before disappearing into the surrounding shrubs.

"And he's gone," Trinne shrugged, not understanding the problem. "I don't think he'd be stupid enough to attack a group of five."

Alistair sighed and reached for his sword, the wooden shield finding its way onto his left arm. The other men followed, preparing their respective weapons. "Alone, no. But in a moment there will be a whole pack of them here."

A half mile down south a collective howl announced dinnertime.
Though the Wilds

For all her naivete concerning wildlife, Trinne knew how to handle herself in a fight, Alistair did have to give her that much. Granted, he knew that from their first run-in with the darkspawn, but five spread out enemies was vastly different from getting mobbed by a starving wolf pack. Regardless, the mage was a fast learner and better at thinking on her feet than he'd have given her credit for. And all four of the recruits were fast getting the hang of working as a team--aside from the occasional near-miss when Trinne or Daveth misjudged where someone was going to be when aiming for the enemy. On the whole, however, it was working rather well, a fact that greatly relieved the warrior.

"Good job," he commented as he wiped his sword on the coat of the alpha wolf, the compliment directed at all of them.

The rogues simply shrugged off the praise, both preoccupied with cleaning off their daggers as best they could. Daveth looked peeved at having had to use them in the first place.

"Not all of us are novices," Jory muttered, glancing meaningfully at the mage.

"Hey, I didn't actually hit you," Trinne retorted good-naturedly. "Just... came close a time or two."

"Or four, luv," Daveth teased and she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Alright, alright," Alistair intervened. "Let's get a move on, we're only halfway to the tower, and I'd really like to reach it before dark."

"Why? Is the big bad templar scared?" the mage ribbed playfully.

He sighed and raised an eyebrow at her, ready to reminded her he hadn't taken is vows and wasn't a templar, technically. But Daveth spoke up first.

"If you knew the stories about the Wilds, you'd be... perturbed as well, m'lady," he commented, sidling up to the mage until they were practically joined at the hip--again. She didn't seem to mind. And Alistair supposed he couldn't really blame the man; Trinne was rather pretty, in a wild, careless sort of way, and she'd hardly been discouraging his flirtations.

Jory simply shook his head at the archer's behavior before striding for what remained of the chief path through the Wilds, pausing to wait for the Warden to take the lead once he reached it.

Resigning himself to the fact he was essentially in charge for now, Alistair joined the knight as they headed out, painfully aware their weapons still needed proper cleaning.

Right. Water...

>>X<<

Fortunately, it didn't take long for them to find a small pond in which they rinsed their weapons, blood tinting murky water with rusty red. It was no waste though - they weren't in need of fresh water, and the two bodies floating nearby guaranteed they wouldn't take this one. The pale, leather-clad corpses had already swelled, floating on the surface and attracting swarms of bloated flies. Harvey wondered briefly who they used to be...Chasinds, most likely. It seemed darkspawn made exceptions for no man.

Finally pleased with the state of his daggers, and not particularly fond of the rather morbid scenery,
the rogue dried the blades with a handful of withered grass and let himself sit down on the nearby rocks. A moment later Alistair followed suit, his long blade laid on the ground beside him. Daveth was a bit further away, keeping guard, so they were waiting only for Ser Jory, who, with a small piece of cloth, was trying to bring back the shine to his greatsword. It would take a while, but he supposed they did need a breather.

Rummaging in his satchel, Harvey found a few pieces of dry meat and offered one to the blond warrior sitting next to him. The man accepted, maybe a bit surprised, and they both silently chewed on salty horsemeat.

The mage girl was impatiently pacing back and forth. "I really don't see a point to this," she remarked. "You can't tell me you honestly don't expect running into more trouble."

The rogue almost, almost forgot about the pain in his left arm. It didn't start hurting directly after his close encounter with magic lightning, but there couldn't be any other reason for a dull ache of muscles. He wasn't in the mood for sparing her the answer.

"I can bet your swords will be just as filthy one hour from now," she continued, and grimaced at three sets of raised male eyebrows. "First you say we have to move on, and then you stop for a picnic! And how can you eat here?" she demanded.

Alistair took a few seconds to swallow a stubborn piece of meat before he spoke. "We're about halfway to the tower, I doubt we're going to make any more stops. You should eat too, even if you don't feel particularly hungry." He smiled, before realizing he was offering food that didn't belong to him. He threw Harv a questioning, and a mildly sheepish, glance.

But Harvey was already ahead, with a sigh extending two remaining pieces in mage's direction. It was a reflex, but Mother taught him better. Good manners above all.

She eyed the snack suspiciously, but took one after a moment of consideration and placed it in her pocket. "I'll eat it later, just...not here," she said, glancing at the lake. "Thanks," she added, a bit appeased.

Harvey shrugged, the motion reminding him of the ache in his shoulder.

"So what's the deal with cleaning your weapons anyways?" Trinne asked again.

It was Jory who finally answered. "It's a discredit for a Knight to not keep his weapon in a good condition," the burly man recited, smiling fondly at his now-clean blade.

Ah, so he's one of those people, Harvey noted.

"What ser Knight meant, my lovely," said a voice coming from amidst the trees, "is that stained weapons can get stuck in their sheaths. Not something you'd want during a battle." Daveth chose this moment to approach, possibly lured by their conversation about food. He pointed at the last piece Harvey was holding, and the rogue threw it in his direction, the city thief catching it without a second thought. He grinned and took a bite. "It's not that poetic."

"But Jory doesn't have a sheath," Trinne pointed out.

"Maybe he needs a shiny surface to check on his bald spot?" Daveth proposed, shrugging.

Ser Jory's face reddened. "I need my blade sharp when I cut hands off of pickpockets," he warned, no real threat in his voice. Daveth snorted, but the noble could feel tension rising in the air. One
"Aaaand, we should go." Standing up and dusting off his knees, Alistair's tone was far too jovial. He placed himself between the two men. "The tower is still a few hours away and I'd like to make it back to Ostagar before dusk."

Harvey, who was suddenly holding his breath, agreed.

>>X<<

Trinne was glad Alistair seemed to have some idea of where he was going. Because she had to admit she had no head for direction and couldn't for the life of her make out the paths he and Cousland seemed to find as easily as main highways. Maybe it was just luck. The warrior hardly struck her as the type who spent his childhood exploring, not if the Chantry got their claws into him as early as he'd hinted a time or two.

Or maybe it was just a 'guy thing', considering Daveth and Jory also picked out path that she'd never have noticed. The mage discarded that theory almost the instant it formed. I'd bet my entropy spellbook Jowan would be just as lost as me if he was here. The though sent her previously good mood spiraling toward grumpy. Nope. Not gonna think about... that, she scolded herself. You promised.

"Hey, where'd that frown come from, Lovely?" Daveth ribbed, nudging her elbow.

"I just... reminded myself of somethin' I'm tryin' to forget," Trinne evaded, pasting on a smile and feathering her fingers through her hair.

The archer raised an eyebrow but accepted the dodge. "I'm more than happy t' help distract you, if ya like."

A giggle bubbled up and this smile was more genuine. "Oh, you're very distracting, trust me."

"Excellent. I hate to see a pretty lass look so glum," he grinned. "Smiles are much more becoming."

"Flatterer," Trinne laughed, giving him a playful shove. It was barely enough to throw him off balance, but the swarthy thief still instinctively grabbed her arm. The mage's laughter increased in volume as she braced her feet to keep them both upright. "Sorry."

"No harm done, luv," Daveth chuckled as he let go of her arm. "But we are getting stern looks from our fellow recruits that say maybe we should keep it down a bit, hmm? So we don't bring every living thing with an attack instinct down on our heads?"

She winced and bit her lip. "Yeah, that would be bad."

So the two settled on companionable silence, though Daveth did rather purposefully maintain his grip on her hand after helping her over a fallen log. Trinne couldn't really say she minded.

They hadn't gone too much farther when Alistair held up a hand in warning.

"More darkspawn?" Jory hissed, sword in hand before he'd finished asking the question.

The Warden nodded. "They're a ways off, but we can maintain the element of surprise, start off with with the upper hand, if we move quietly."

"Least as much as some of us are able," Daveth chimed in, trying his best to look like the jibe wasn't
aimed at anyone in particular. Trinne raised an eyebrow at him, knowing full well the two of them had made the most noise out of the five. But he simply shot her an innocent look in response as the recruits fell in behind Alistair, all five moving as quietly as possible. It was, however, much harder to quietly through underbrush and dead leaves than it was to do so down tower hallways, and Trinne was painfully aware of how much noise she still made.

Despite that, when Alistair motioned for them to halt again, this time within sight of lichen-mottled ruins, he seemed satisfied. "I don't think they sensed us..."

"They? I only see one," Jory commented, nodding toward the staff-wielding darkspawn standing in the middle of a rickety bridge.

"There are more beyond it." Alistiar motioned to the crude barricades that had been erected on the far side of the bridge. "Back there." He sighed. "I suppose this is where we lose the element of surprise. No way to get over there without that emissary noticing us..."

"Emissary?" Trinne parroted in confusion.

"Darkspawn mages," the warrior elaborated.

"Oohh." She nodded her understanding and fell silent.

"I think I can solve your problem," Daveth cut in. "I can take it out." He reached for his bow, gaze drifting to Trinne.

"You think you can shoot it from here?" Jory hissed in disbelief. "I'm no archer, but the angle and the distance-"

"I can make the shot," Daveth interrupted, nocking an arrow and drawing back the string.

A fraction of a second later, the archer and Jory were both proven right--Daveth did make the shot, but thanks to the nearly impossible angle, what would normally have been a killshot buried half its length in the emissary's shoulder instead.

As the darkspawn bellowed in pain, green magic flaring from its staff, Alistair and the other recruits all spared a moment to raise an eyebrow at the swarthy thief while readying their own weapons.

"What? I hit it, didn't I?" he shrugged. "Come on, then. Let's deal with this thing."

"Not like we have much choice," Trinne pointed out as the five of them broke cover and charged the darkspawn.

It chuffed out a laugh before turning on its heel and running--just as three stocky genlock rogues appeared as if out of thin air.

Alistair cursed. "Hate it when they do that. You three--" he nodded at Jory, Cousland, and Trinne--"Take care of the rogues. You, with me," he pointed at Daveth before chasing after the emissary.

Trinne scowled, not particularly happy with this division. What can you do... she reminded herself, watching to see which darkspawn the noble and the knight focused on, planning to take the one left over. A thought occurred to her, smile quirking her lips as tan light built around her hand. With a flick of her wrist, all three genlocks suddenly lost their coordination. The trio were then much easier targets for the recruits. Jory decapitated one, taking advantage of his sword's increased reach. Trinne fried the second one with a bolt of lightning, and Cousland deflected a clumsy strike from the last one before driving his dagger into the unprotected hollow of its collarbone. It dropped like a puppet
with no strings.

"C'mon, they're gonna need backup," Trinne urged, already moving toward the bridge.

Daveth stood just past the far end, scowling as he dodged arrows, firing back whenever he had an opening. " Took you long enough..."

Knowing it took them no more than a minute or two at most, Trinne couldn't help letting out a sharp bark of sarcastic laughter. "Well, fighting sure brings out the worst in you," she teased as Jory and Cousland went after the hurlock archers stationed on either side of the bridge.

"Not fighting, luv. Snares," the archer corrected, with a reluctant smile, tugging against the sturdy vine trap that had caught his ankle. "Bein' made the fool twice in front of a pretty gal didn't help, either. Duck!"

Trinne obeyed instinctively, hearing the thwack of an arrow embedding itself in the post behind her. She threw a lightning spell at the hurlock responsible, the electricity tingling as it flew from her fingertips. "So where's Alistair?"

"Followed the emissary farther that way." Daveth gestured toward the path with an arrow before nocking it to the bowstring. "He prob'ly needs help more than me, Lovely. I can handle this; 'specially if Harvey and Ser Knight stick around." He nodded toward where the warrior and rogue were working together--quite well, Trinne had to admit--to take down a charging group of hurlocks.

"You sure?" she pressed, not liking the idea of leaving him unprotected, especially trapped as he was.

"I am. I've been in worse fixes."

"Really?"

He chuckled. "No. But I really will be fine. Go help the fearless leader."

Trinne laughed as did as instructed, hurrying toward where the archer had indicated. "Alist-

The impacting roar of flame against stone drown her out. She swore and broke into a run, nearly tripping over the uneven hem of her robes as she rounded a bend in the path. The lingering embers of a fireball were just clearing from the air as she came face to face with the gloating emissary. Alistair was down, splayed across the rocky ground like a discarded toy. And he wasn't moving.

The emissary, however, looked like it found her far more interesting than the unconscious or--Maker, please no--dead warrior. She intended to keep it that way. "Hey ugly, why don'tcha pick on someone who's actually a threat!"

Whatever its intelligence level, the creature growled at the taunt, firing sickly green arcane bolts at her from its gnarled staff. She managed to dodge most of them, but one grazed her hip and knocked her off balance. The emissary took advantage of the moment it took the mage to regain her footing and started building another fireball between its palms.

"Oh, no you don't, bastard!" she muttered, risking the extra concentration it took to hurl a stonefist straight through the growing flames to slam into the darkspawn's gut. It lurched backward, growling, and returned fire with a hastily conjured lightning bolt.

Trinne dodged sideways, wrinkling her nose at the smell of burning ozone as the crackling ball of energy flew by.
Deciding she'd wasted enough time and needed to simply *finish* this, she conjured a disorientation spell and hurled it at the emissary. The tan light flew right where she wanted it to go and the darkspawn stumbled. A torrent of flame burst from its hands, but missed her completely.

"Entropy *rules,*" the mage whispered as she summoned another spell, this one manifesting as a purple glyph under the emissary's rough boots. Now even the weak arcane bolts from her staff would cause serious damage, a fact she took advantage of immediately. She only had a limited supply of lyrium in her pack, and preferred to make it last by using attacks that consumed less mana.

The emissary, it seemed, wasn't in the mood to go down without a fight, hurling various spells of its own.

Trinne couldn't help letting out a hiss of pain as one of the spells found its mark and she felt life leech out of her. Apparently the emissary was a fan of entropy as well. She threw another lightning bolt at it and was rewarded with an angry roar of pain.

"Serves you right, bloody monster!" she taunted, slinging another stone projectile in its direction.

It dodged, let out another chuffing laugh--almost as if taunting her right back--and started working on another fireball.

It never finished. Trinne figured the arrow that seemed to sprout suddenly from the creature's throat had something to do with that. Okay, *everything* to do with it. The darkspawn tried to look at the feathered shaft, groping the end with one hand, before toppling like a tree in a windstorm.

Trinne spun to look behind her and caught Daveth smirking as he lowered his bow.

"Figured you could use a hand, Lovely," the archer commented.

"How...?" Trinne frowned in confusion.

"Harvey was kind enough to cut the snare in between darkspawn," Daveth explained. "And fortunately the damage to m'leg only impairs my ability to walk, not my aim."

"Andraste's flaming pyre, what happened here?" Jory demanded as he and the rogue came around the bend.

"I saved Alistair--least I think I did--then Daveth saved *me,*" Trinne filled him in.

At the mention of the Warden, four pairs of eyes dropped to the prone figure, still laying exactly as Trinne had found him. The mage knelt, hesitantly rolling the warrior on his back. Though his shield bore charred marks from the emissary's fireball and a fairly obvious lump had sprouted from the back of his head, Alistair's armor and face were undamaged. It was, Trinne had to admit to herself, not a hard face to look at. If she could forget it belonged to a templar.

"He's not dead, is he?" Daveth prodded, brow wrinkling in concern.

Trinne shook her head, more than a little relieved. "No. He's breathing, see?" She motioned toward the steady rise and fall of his chest. "Just got knocked out."

"We should go back."

Even knowing Jory would be the one to voice such a sentiment didn't stop Trinne from rolling her eyes. However, Daveth beat her to a countering argument, so she resumed her examination of the warrior.
"After coming so far, d'you really want to just give up?" the archer demanded.

"In case you hadn't noticed, ser thief, dusk is rather rapidly approaching, and the only person who knows where we're going is unconscious," Jory countered. "Can we even find this tower without him? And don't you think we should get him back to camp, where there are healers? We can try again tomorrow."

"For all we know, tomorrow might be too late," Daveth argued, crossing his arms. "Or have you forgotten about the battle the king is planning on tonight?"

"How could these documents possibly be so important?" the knight huffed.

Trinne glanced up at Cousland, noting that he didn't particularly care who won the argument, so long as it finished and they did something. She was of a mind to agree with Daveth, but was having enough trouble with her mental debate, she figured she'd avoid adding her voice to the external one.

This could be a perfect chance to practice those healing spells Wynne taught you. You have to do something, right? Or else all this will have been for nothing. He has all the signs of this being a concussion. I can't think of anything else that would help...

Using magic without knowing what you're doing seldom has good results, Wynne's voice lectured in her head. You may do more harm than good, no matter your intentions.

The young mage bit her lip and continued mentally arguing the point as Daveth and Jory's bickering increased in volume.

"I could scout ahead a bit." He'd been silent for so long, it took a moment for Trinne to realize it was Cousland who made the offer.

She nodded. "Good idea, I guess. If you can figure out how far to the tower, or whatever's left of it, maybe we can settle this." She jerked a thumb toward the still-arguing knight and thief. Cousland gave a single nod and headed off.

"Tell me, do you enjoy the thought of walking into a band of darkspawn completely unawares?" Jory was asking. "He's the only one of us who can sense those monsters."

Daveth shrugged. "It's a risk I'm willing to run. It'll be damned if I quit before we finish what we set out to do." He gestured at their unconscious leader. "Besides, he might wake up any second."

"Again, may I point out the fast approaching dusk? I'd rather fail this mission than be eaten by the darkspawn."

"Maybe we can wake him up," Daveth suggested.

Trinne snorted. "I doubt it. It's not like he's asleep an' you can just poke him or tickle his feet to get him awake."

The archer untied his water pouch. "Would dousing 'im work? Because that would be a worthwhile sacrifice."

"Trust me, if I thought that would work, I'd've done it already. I think it would just be a waste."

"Hey, where'd Cousland get to?" Daveth asked.

"Finally noticing? He went to scout ahead; see if he can locate this tower. Prob'ly just wanted a break
from listening to you two lunkheads yellin' at each other," she teased.

"Well, then, let's wait for him to return before we make any decisions," Jory suggested.

"Good idea. And maybe our fearless leader will have returned to the land of the living by then."

"Don't hold your breath," Trinne cautioned the archer. "Head injuries are unpredictable."

"You a healer?" Daveth asked, sounding more than a little hopeful.

"...Yes and no..." Trinne admitted. "I know some healing spells, but I only learned them today, and haven't had a chance to practice."

"Well, then." The archer sat down heavily on a nearby boulder. "You can practice on me, m'lady. My knee hurts somethin' fierce. Give you something t' do while we wait for our friend to get back," he wheedled.

"Well... okay. I guess it can't hurt," she conceded. "Just your knee?"

"And ankle," Daveth added cheerily.

She tried to glare at him but failed miserably. "Fine."

She was in the middle of healing the archer's ankle when the noble returned, not looking exceptionally disappointed or relieved. But then again, Cousland hasn't exactly been forthcoming with his emotions thus far... "Well?"

He shrugged. "There's a clearing maybe an hour's walk from here. Might be our destination."

"Any ruins?" Daveth chipped in, squirming as Trinne's spell worked on his leg.

"Hold still!" she admonished.

"It itches, I told you that before," the archer retorted before looking back at his fellow rogue.

Cousland raised an eyebrow but shook his head. "I couldn't see any. Doesn't look like a lake, though." He tossed a concerned glance at Alistair. "He's still unconscious?"

"Yeah, sleeping princess still needs a wake-up kiss, if that's what you mean," Daveth joked.

The rogue just looked at him for a long moment before deadpanning, "Be my guest."

Daveth took the dig in stride. "I think it might work better if left to our resident damsel."

Trinne rolled her eyes. "Tch. He's cute, but templars aren't my type."

"Sure, you say that now." Daveth teased.

"I will hurt you," she warned, giggling.

"I'm terrified, luv. You could just heal him. Now that you have practice."

"Since I don't seem to have much choice..." she sighed, hands glowing bluish-white once more. For a long moment, the spell seemed to have absolutely no effect. Trinne gnawed her lower lip in consternation. Why didn't it work? Daveth's leg I did fine... is this just more co- Her nervous mental ramblings were brought to an abrupt end as the prone warrior moaned, grimaced, and moved to rub
the back of his head before his eyes even opened.

"Oooww." Hazel eyes flickered open as he pushed himself to a sitting position. "...what happened?"

"It's a long story, involving darkspawn, a fireball, and me being generally awesome," Trinne joked.

"Sure, that's why I killed it," Daveth ribbed.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're still getting along well," Alistair mumbled, rubbing the back of his head. "We really need to get moving if we want to reach the tower before it gets dark..."

"So we are close?" Daveth raised an eyebrow as Jory offered the Warden a hand up.

"Less than an hour, if I remember correctly," Alistair nodded, missing the look Daveth shot Jory behind his back. The knight very pointedly ignored him, falling in step next to Cousland and leaving the rearguard position to Trinne and Daveth.

>>X<<

Alistair was right; it was just under an hour later that they came within sight of ruins that definitely could have been a tower at some point in the distant past. Even here, there was evidence of the darkspawn's advance; crude barricades decorated with skulls, piles of rotting filth Trinne really didn't want to look at too closely, and a small complement of darkspawn that they dispatched far more quickly than the group by the bridge. The only one that was any kind of challenge was the one Alistair called an alpha, more heavily armored that its underlings, and rather skillfull with its mismatched blades. It still didn't stand a chance. After all the darkspawn were dead, Alistair, Cousland, and Jory cleaned their weapons as best they could on the dry grass.

"This is it," Alistair confirmed, gesturing to the worn-down griffon emblem barely visible on one of the foundation stones.

"About bloody time," Daveth muttered.

Alistair frowned at the comment, but said nothing, brushing aside the vines that obscured the view of inside the tower. He tensed. "Blast it!"

The four recruits all followed as the junior Warden hurried across the overgrown tower floor to the smashed remains of a wooden chest. He knelt in front of it, pushing aside fragments of dry-rotted wood. "The treaties. They're gone!"

Before any of them could press him for details, a voice purred from the lengthening shadows, "Well, well, well, what have we here?"
All five of the Wardens flinched at the voice, the men all instinctively tightening their grip on the weapons as they turned toward the shadows that hid the speaker. Trinne felt the magic flaring toward her fingertips fade away as a dark-haired woman stepped into view.

"Are you a vulture, I wonder? A scavenger poking amidst a corpse whose bones are long since cleaned?" she mused, moving forward in the closest thing to a swagger Trinne had ever seen, "Or merely an intruder, come into these darkspawn-filled Wilds of mine in search of easy prey?" She strode past the group, stopping on a ridge just outside the crumbling tower that enabled her to look down on them before posing her last question. "What say you, hm? Scavenger, or intruder?"

Trinne mirrored the woman's crossed-arms posture and snapped out a question of her own. "And just how, exactly, are these your Wilds? I wasn't aware anyone owned them."

The other woman--a fellow mage, evidenced by the crooked staff at her back and the power Trinne could sense practically rolling off her--chuckled, as if humoring a small child. "Because I know them as only one who owns them could." She raised an eyebrow. "Can you claim the same?"

"Don't answer her," Alistair interjected as Trinne opened her mouth to do just that, "She looks Chasind, and that means there may be others nearby."

"Oooh, you fear barbarians will swoop down upon you?" the woman mocked, throwing up her arms in a derisive gesture.

"Yes," Alistair snarked back. "Swooping is bad."

"She's a Witch of the Wilds," Daveth accused, some half-forgotten superstition crystallizing into actual fear in his eyes. "She'll turn us all into toads!"

"Witch of the Wilds? Such idle fancies those legends. Have you no minds of your own?" She snorted and turned back to Trinne. "You there. Women do not frighten like little boys. Tell me your name, and I shall tell you mine."

Trinne cocked an eyebrow at the scrutiny. "You can call me Trinne." She could feel Alistair and Daveth tense as she introduced herself, but she was a mage herself, and she'd never yet heard of any hex or curse that required knowing your victim's name. If she's going to do anything to me, not knowing my name won't stop her.

Their surprise visitor nodded. "And you may call me Morrigan, if you wish. Now, shall I guess your purpose?" she prodded. "You sought something in that chest, did you not? Something that is here no longer?"

"'Here no longer?'" Alistair parroted indignantly. "You stole them, didn't you?! You're some sort of... sneaky... witch-thief!"

Morrigan eyed him with cool disinterest, bordering on disdain. "How very eloquent. Tell me, how does one steal from dead men?"

"Quite easily, it seems," Alistair scowled. "Those documents are Grey Warden property, and I suggest you return them."

"I will not, for 'twas not I who removed them," Morrigan retorted. "Invoke a name that means..."
nothing any longer if you wish, I am not threatened."

"Then who removed them?" Once again, thanks to his prolonged silence, Trinne found herself doing a double-take to confirm it was Cousland who'd asked.

Morrigan raised her eyebrows. "Twas my mother, in fact."

"Your mother?!" Trinne blurted in surprise.

"Yes, my mother." The other mage rolled her eyes. "Did you assume I spawned from a log?"

"A thieving, weird-talking log, perhaps," Alistair muttered under his breath.

Morrigan apparently heard him anyway, because she scoffed. "Not all in the Wilds are monsters. Flowers grow as well as toads. If you wish, I will take you to my mother," she offered. "Tis not far from here, and you may ask her for your papers, if you like."

The blond warrior sighed. "We do need those treaties, but I dislike this... Morrigan's sudden appearance. It's too convenient."

Trinne shrugged off his concern. "Stranger things have happened, Alistair. I say go with her."

Daveth all but cringed at the words, shifting nervously. "She'll put us all in the pot, she will, just you watch."

"If the pot's warmer than this forest, it'll be a nice change," Jory pointed out.

Morrigan shrugged. "Follow me than, if it pleases you."

Not seeing any other way to achieve their goal, Trinne raised her shoulders in a shrug of her own and did exactly that.

>>X<<

Harvey kept quiet, even though with every step he wondered if those documents were truly worth it. The most foolish of people would think twice before following a stranger into the wilds, and yet here they were--by their own free will, no less--surrounded by falling dusk, convinced by possibly baseless promises. His inner wanderer pierced through the wall of apathy, and was frantically waving a red flag.

The rogue sighed. He supposed their guide had had enough chances to walk them right into an ambush by now, and there were more convenient ways of leading them to certain death, robbing them blind and leaving their corpses to please various scavengers. The comforting value of the thought was trifling, and yet it persisted in his mind - even as the group left any semblance of visible paths behind.

The Chasind woman silently led their little procession, feminine figure flickering between the trees like a purple shadow, Trinne following not far behind, looking determined to keep up the pace. The male part of the company kept enough distance to appear either reasonably cautious or cowardly, and Harvey wondered how much of it was simple superstition.

Giant rats. Ser Gilmore's joke surfaced in noble's mind, unexpected, but maybe not entirely out of context. Warning tales meant for children spoke of witches kidnapping little boys and girls who strayed too far away from home, never to be seen again. The story differed of course, depending on the teller, and Harvey himself knew two versions - one told by Nan, who'd always focus on the 'not
wandering too far away from home' part, which he tended to do often as a child, carelessly adding new worry lines to his caretaker's furrowed face. Another version he had heard from mother Mallol--her story, most likely a Chantry reinterpretation of the old folk tale, emphasized on unfavorable portrayal of the stranger who was usually both a young woman and a magic user. And it wasn't until he was old enough, that he understood she was hinting at abstinence in association to both. Two birds with one stone, as Fergus would say.

This woman, this *Morrigan*, was both, and certainly didn't do anything to hide it. If that was the reason why three, or rather four, grown men cowered earlier and let the outspoken Circle mage do the talking, he wasn't sure. But he suspected they'd all known these tales, one way or another--devout men cast away, seduced by an unholy temptress, their bodies ending up at the bottom of lakes--or worse--eaten. Quite ridiculous, if you think about it.

He briefly wondered if young women were given their own version, with a handsome Chasind warrior or chief.

Harvey almost, *almost* smiled at that, before feeling his throat tighten. He'd never get to casually mention to Mallol he'd been 'lured' deep into the forest by an exotic enchantress, or get to see her reaction, even if it was almost too easy for him to imagine. Feeling his thoughts spiraling down to the one place he didn't want them be, he quickly chased Highever away from his mind and tried focusing on something else.

Thankfully the girl in front of him, Trinne, provided a distraction, stumbling a bit over a tricky root and cursing silently, her robes too long to properly see what was under her feet. The rogue was surprised to feel a pang of sympathy, but they were all tired, and her attire was the least practical for such excursions. Also, somehow in the middle of all this she seemed to have lost Daveth, who till now has been as tenacious as a burr. Still, undeterred, she held up the folds of her robes and pressed further.

Pursuing the documents was mainly her call. He couldn't deny--something crucial and possibly final took place as their only female recruit elbowed her way to the front and spoke for all of them. Not that any of the companions, not even the Grey Warden Alistair protested to the greater extent. If he'd bet his money on who'd become the leader of their little group, he'd have lost it all. He briefly wondered if it was going to last, after or if they got to return to Ostagar.

"Well, at least the view is nice," Daveth remarked, pointing at both female leads. Harvey turned his head, startled, not having noticed the city thief catching up to him. But even before the words sunk in enough to question what could possibly keep the pickpocket's mind out of the gutter, he saw his face--the earlier cockiness scampered away, leaving only anxiety--for all his bravado he was only trying to relieve the tension. "Those treaties better be made of solid gold, I swear, it's making my skin crawl," he continued, this time openly unhappy.

Harvey let the words hang in the air, echoing his own musings from earlier, and silently agreed. Yes, he could like Daveth. Terrible sense of timing, but the man was as observant as he was disillusioned, and most likely pinpointed what's been subconsciously bothering them to a greater or lesser extent. The golden-eyed woman moved through thick wilderness with an almost unnatural ease, her exposed arm and shoulder lacking scratches and bruises the young noble felt should be there. She really was *her*, the Witch of the Wilds...in the middle of her home. It was troubling, the rogue had seen enough to know people who chose life in seclusion didn't do it to randomly approach strangers, and especially not with a helping hand. And for her to so conveniently show up at the right time, with information on the thing they needed... even if she wasn't leading them into a trap...
"She wants something," the noble finally caved, speaking too softly for anyone other than Daveth to hear.

"Yeah, don't we all," came a sour reply. "I'm just wondering are we going to have to pay now, or later."

It was a good question, and Harvey shook his head, not knowing the answer.

>>X<<

She never thought she'd miss the narrow, worn tracks Alistair had considered "paths", but as her foot snagged on an invisible root for the umpteenth time, Trinne had to admit that was precisely what she was wishing for. Morrigan seemed to know these Wilds uncannily well, which fit her earlier claim, but made it hard to keep up. Especially since superstition apparently trumped all else and Daveth refused to come any closer to the Witch—if that was indeed who she was.

By the time they finally reached the small clearing, dominated by a rickety, thatch-roofed hut, Trinne's robes were smeared with mud practically to her waist, and her sleeves sported enough small rips she was almost wishing for something a bit more like the leather skirt and leggings their guide wore. First chance I get, I'm buying something more practical to wear, she promised herself as Morrigan hailed the old woman standing in front of the hut as if waiting for them.

"Greetings, Mother I bring before you five Grey Wardens who—"

"I see them, girl," the old woman interrupted, crossing her arms and looking over the group. "Mmm. Much as I expected."

"Are we supposed to believe you were expecting us?" Alistair spoke up, doubt filling his eyes.

Morrigan's mother shrugged. "You are required to do nothing, least of all believe. Shut one's eyes tight or open one's eyes wide, either way, one's a fool!"

Daveth actually backpedaled a step as she spread her hands. "She's a witch, I tell you! We shouldn't be talking to her!

"Quiet, Daveth!" Jory hissed, grabbing the shorter man's arm as if he feared the pickpocket would run away otherwise. "If she is a witch, d'you really want to make her mad?"

The old woman chuckled. "There is a smart lad. Sadly irrelevant in the scheme of things, but it is not I who decides. Believe what you will." She glanced at Trinne, taking in the stained robes and crossed arms of the young mage. "And what of you? Does your woman's mind give you a different viewpoint? Or do you believe as these boys do?"

Trinne chewed her lip in thought before finally admitting, "I'm not sure what to believe. You being crazy and/or dangerous is definitely an option...

"A statement that possesses more wisdom than it implies," the older woman chuckled. "Be always aware... or was it oblivious? I can never remember." She lifted her shoulders in another careless shrug. "So much about you is uncertain, child... and yet I believe." She cocked her head slight. "Do I? Why it seems I do!"

"So... this is a dreaded Witch of the Wilds?" Alistair drawled, voice dripping skepticism.

"Witch of the Wilds, eh?" she cackled. "Morrigan must have told you that. She fancies such tales,
though she would never admit it! Oh, how she dances under the moon!" She laughed again, loud and raspy.

"They did not come to listen to your wild tales, Mother," Morrigan sighed, rubbing her forehead as if it suddenly ached.

"True, they came for their treaties, yes?" he mother nodded, disappearing briefly into the hut and returning with a trio of weathered, crackling scrolls. "And before you begin barking, your precious seal wore off long ago. I have protected these." She handed them to Trinne.

"You..." Alistair began, interrupting himself as her words sank in. "Oh. You protected them?"

"...Why?" Cousland asked, tone not quite suspicious, but not quite friendly, either.

"And why not?" the Witch retorted with a shrug. "Take them to your Grey Wardens, and tell them this Blight's threat is greater than they realize!"

Trinne nodded, carefully stowing the scrolls in her pack. "Thank you for returning them."

"Such manners!" Morrigan's mother laughed. "Always in the last place you look. Like stockings." She laughed again, the same eerie, rasping cackle. "Oh, don't mind me! You have what you came for."

"Time for you to go, then." Morrigan nodded towards the surrounding wilderness.

"Do not be ridiculous, girl!" her mother scolded, just as Trinne opened her mouth to protest. "These are your guests."

Morrigan sighed. "Oh, very well. I will show you out of the woods. Follow me," she beckoned, heading back the way they'd come.

>>X<<

They were a very odd group, these Wardens her mother was so interested in. Morrigan couldn't help but wonder why, even though she knew better than to ask. Her mother kept her secrets for a reason, and did not share them lightly. Still, these five did not seem so extraordinary, save perhaps the fiery one, Trinne; and her only because she was mage. The two warriors seemed the typical, dim-witted, short-sighted clods, same as any she'd met in her years prowling the Wilds. Even now, she could feel the blond's suspicious gaze on the back of her head, as if the man was trying to read her thoughts.

_I wish you the best of luck, fool. Twill certainly be needed._ The Witch allowed herself a small smirk, amused by the thought as she was by the man's suspicion itself. At least his was not the all-consuming fear brought on by swallowing mindless superstitions as truth, like the archer. The one who had seemed all but glued to Trinne's side--right up to the moment she trusted the word of a witch, and old wives' tales trumped any attraction he felt for the brazen young woman.

And as for the other rogue, the younger man with the green eyes and apathy in his posture, he'd been too quiet, gone along with the majority's decisions rather than cause trouble. She was slightly piqued to admit--even to herself--that she couldn't form any _real_ judgment about the man, other then him being as quiet and diplomatic as Trinne was outspoken and rash.

They would be quite... interesting to watch after they were true Wardens, not mere recruits, she mused, enjoying a moment of private amusement at the idea, even as they reached the edge of the Wilds. The bright tents of the king and his men could be seen not far off, mingled with crumbling ruins and dotted by the occasional bonfire.
"I think we can manage from here," Trinne commented, eyeing the relatively short distance to the encampment.

"Yes, definitely can make it *on our own* from here," the blond agreed meaningfully.

Morrigan rolled her eyes at his unsubtle dismissal. "Very well, as it pleases you." She turned to head back to her Wilds.

"Thank you!" Trinne called behind her, and Morrigan had to smile at the girl's enthusiasm, even if she didn't acknowledge her thanks as she allowed the dusk and the Wilds to swallow her up.

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It wasn't until Alistair was satisfied the mysterious Witch was *gone* that the warrior headed for the encampment at a vigorous pace. He was almost as hard to keep up with as Morrigan had been, and Trinne *almost* hollered at him to *slow down*. But given how rapidly nightfall was approaching, and that Daveth was once again willing to walk next to her and knock aside the worst of the branches, she decided to keep her mouth shut, at least about that.

"So, how come Morrigan scared you s'bad?" she asked Daveth. "I mean, darkspawn don't scare you, but a dark-haired woman in half a shirt *does*?"

He chuckled sheepishly. "You're not from Ferelden originally, are you, Lovely?"

Trinne shook her head. "Kirkwall. I was sent to Kinloch Hold's Circle when I was eight."

"Well, then, trust me, if you knew *half* the stories I do about the Witch of the Wilds, you'd've been scared, too."

She laughed. "I doubt that. Not much scares me. Even if it *should*."

"Dunno if I'd brag about that, darlin'. It's a trait that gets people killed."

"Sometimes," she conceded with a shrug, "but so does almost any trait you can name."

"Ah, point," Daveth laughed, pushing aside a particularly hefty branch, the last of its kind before they emerged from the woods and reached the gates.
Their small rag-tag group visited the kennels first, surprisingly, despite Alistair's urgent reminders they should get on with their mission, and head directly to Duncan. The mage girl was very adamant about the matter—the look in her eyes ending the discussion—and brought up the very sound point the pens were on their way there anyways. The rest of the team followed, which gave Harvey a very good hint concerning the future of the girl's leadership.

The kennel master was grateful for the flower, especially since the mage refused any sort of reward for her trouble, simply glancing in the direction of the mabari she helped to muzzle earlier before giving the caretaker a hopeful look.

The rogue felt that if he wanted to get things done, this was the right moment, and as the group was leaving he excused himself, promising to catch up with them later. Trinne simply shrugged, their earlier tiff clearly fresh in her mind. Only the junior Grey Warden seemed a bit concerned, but Harvey guessed he was more afraid of letting his superior down than the thought Harvey was going to get misplaced somehow.

After they had gone, he loitered behind for a bit, exchanging a few additional words with the kennel master, and soon was on his way as well. Priorities first—find a healer. His left arm didn't hurt as much as it did before, but the grip felt weaker, which was even more distracting and worrisome. He hesitated by the stone elevation where young Sisters of the Chantry looked after the heavily wounded and soldiers slowly consumed by the Taint, but then continued on, slowly shaking his head. He had no doubt his hand was going to be fine—in time—and women knowledgeable in healing techniques could quicken the process with aid of herbs and bandages. But considering the hectic atmosphere surrounding the falling dusk, he needed his hand functional at short notice. And where to better find a remedy for injuries caused by magic, than amidst other mages? So that's where he headed, against his better judgment.

The part of Ostagar camp housing Circle mages was considerable in size, but noticeably cut off from the outside encampment. Harvey didn't see any walls worthy of mention, but the tightly crowded tents had all of their entrances facing inwards, towards the middle of the enclave. A few templars wandered about, the men looking interested in keeping things in as much as keeping them out, and Harvey got a slight clue why their mage companion might be treating the blond would-be templar with such open reluctance. Scrapping the obvious idea of asking to be let in—it would only raise everybody's guard—he decided to question the only mage-like person standing outside the makeshift border. The robe clad man turned out to be something other than Harvey expected, with an expressionless face and voice of grey monotone, but he was helpful, and the rogue found out what he wanted. No, templars don't let anyone in, sans high ranking officers, and if he was looking for a talented healer he should talk to Wynne, red tent, east side of the encampment. And no, he cannot guide him there, it's against the regulations. The rogue didn't inquire further, because that short conversation left his skin crawling—he couldn't read the man at all and what's worse, he suspected there wasn't actually anything to read behind the blue eyes.

The noble was on verge of giving up, but running fingers through his hair in frustration reminded him his arm still didn't feel like it should. He absentmindedly fished out a couple of pine needles from between black strands, and came to a decision. At most they were going to punish him for trespassing. Thanking the falling darkness for being on his side, he eyed the mage camp as a whole and found the tent that might belong to the person he was looking for. Feeling for the right moment with no soul in sight paying attention, he got in between the wall of tents and a row of ruined stone
He was lucky, he only encountered one small group of mages, and they were far too absorbed in conversation to notice that the irregular shadow lurking between the linen didn't belong there. Relieved, he waited for them to disappear from view before continuing his endeavor. The red tent wasn't located too far from the border of the mage encampment, so a few careful turns left him standing before two loose sheets of fabric serving as an entrance. He hesitated, his first reflex to knock, or at least announce his presence. Unfortunately, the first one was impossible and the second unwise, so in the end he braced himself and carefully let himself in.

The lone woman grinding odorous herbs on the mortar was of certain age, her hair grey in the light cast by a wisp-thing floating over a small table--Harvey couldn't help but stare for a moment--but she held her back straight, and the look she gave him, judging from head to toe, could have belonged to someone thirty years younger. She seemed surprised, but not overly so, as if random intrusions weren't even at the bottom of the list of things she found distressing. He held his hands up so she could see them, and know he meant no harm. Without breaking her work, she picked a few leaves of elfroot laying beside her on a bench, and threw them inside the stone bowl.

"Young man, how did you get here? And don't reply 'through the front entrance', because I swear I've got a broom here somewhere."

He shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what would be the best way to start. Noticing his consternation, the mage took pity, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Alright then, not how...why?" she relented.

This one proved easier. "My arm was hurt in the Wilds. By magic," he added, as if it could justify sneaking under the noses of templars. "It feels...weaker. I thought, I wondered, if a healer could take a look at it. I can pay you," he said quickly, to avoid misunderstandings. He needed no gratuitous favors, and his name wasn't going to be a monetary assurance for everybody, as he found out. Harvey took out a small green stone, a malachite he found by one of the killed darkspawn. It wasn't much, but this and a few coppers was all he had left right now.

The woman tilted her head and the rogue mentally slapped himself, realizing there might be a fatal flaw in his reasoning--he should have started with the basics. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "Are you the healer, Wynne? I was told I could find her here. If you're not her, don't let me distract you further."

"You found her, and you're not distracting me," she assured. She got up and wiped her fingers on her heavy apron. "In the Wilds? Are you a part of Fergus Cousland's patrol, then? I never heard they got back."

Because they didn't. At least not from what he could gather while walking through camp. He shook his head, not seeing any reason to lie. "I'm one of the Grey Warden recruits, we were sent to the Wilds on a mission of sorts." He rubbed his left arm. "This here was an...accident with lightning?"

"Really now?" He could swear that got some sort of recognition from her, the elder mage contemplated his words a few moments longer than he thought she should. In the end she sighed heavily, as if she personally failed at an important task. "It seems warden recruits are coming in through doors and windows today. Metaphorically, of course. Your name?"

"Harvey."
"Alright then, Harvey, hop out of your armor," she said, and then almost chuckled at his expression. "I need to see your shoulder as well," she explained slowly, as to a small child, and the rogue caught himself fumbling with the buckles. Well, he knew that tone. This woman was definitely a teacher. "And hide that stone of yours, you might need it later."

And then she told him to take his shirt off.

"Squeeze," she ordered as she held both of his hands. She tsk-ed with discontent and asked him to try to flex and then straighten his left arm. Bluish light flickered between her fingers as she inspected muscles, tendons and nerves. "You can breathe normally," she reminded gently and Harvey let out the breath he'd been unconsciously holding, a bit abashed.

"Don't worry, boy, I'm not going to cut your hand off," the mage promised, and that made him relax a bit. Maybe that was the reason he never mentioned to Trinne the problem with him limb—in fear she'd try to fix it? She admitted to being a beginner when it comes to healing arts, and he wanted to have someone who knew what they were doing?

Wynne gave his shoulder a more thorough look. "The muscles are a bit strained, and nerves...Well, nothing two weeks of rest couldn't take care of. But I know you younglings have no care for such trivial things," she added in conspiratorial tone and then pointed at the wooden bench. "Sit down."

Soon she was back with a jar of ointment. The pleasant scent of spearmint spread through the air, and Harvey felt a wave of heat and tingling in his shoulder, where Wynne's fingers were doing their work. Blue light grew in intensity.

"It doesn't happen often," she conversed, "for someone from the outside to come looking for help from a mage. Or risk getting that help."

"My family employed mages on occasions." It was the truth. Even he himself was supposedly healed this way before, when he caught a severe case of pneumonia as a child, and stubbornly refused to get better. He couldn't validate it with his memories, as he was too small to remember at the time, but this was what his mother told him.

"Couslands of Highever," he forestalled the mage's next question. For a moment, the tingling in his skin subsided, only to return with new strength. He couldn't see her face.

"You are the teyrn's younger son." It was a statement, not a question, and he just nodded. "I'm sorry, I didn't know your parents, but I heard they were good people."

Word travels fast. He didn't know if it was because the mage had grandmotherly aura around her, or because she seemed genuinely sincere, but her words choked him up more than Duncan's official condolences or the careful words and the hesitant glances their female companion had been throwing his way, until she finally gave up.
Wynne must have felt his clenched throat, because she dropped the subject. They sat for a few minutes in complete silence, her focused on her work, and him trying to calm his jarred nerves. At last she finished, visibly pleased, and asked him to try and move his arm for a bit. He carefully grabbed a dagger and performed a few slow, controlled moves. The reflexes were good, great even. Normal.

"Thank you," he said, and it was the closest to happy he's been for what seemed like eternity.

"You Grey Wardens have a long and difficult path ahead of you," she stated as he fought with the last of his belts. The calm of the tent was interrupted by a commotion outside and they both listened in for a moment. She glanced at the entrance thoughtfully, then back at him, her gaze unreadable. "Care to help an old woman walk outside for a bit? I'm unsure if my old bones will manage on their own."

He nodded, surprised and thankful, she was practically offering a safe passage to the outside, so he could avoid trouble. She really didn't have to go that far. But whether she felt bad for him, or had another motive altogether, you don't look gift horse in the mouth, as they say. He silently promised himself that one day he'd return the favor--walking out of the tent, he slipped the malachite near the jar with ointment. For a good start.

Their walk was short, the straight path from her tent to the border of the enclave laughably short as the crow flies. They turned a few heads, but nobody truly bothered them. Though he could swear he heard a few loud whistles that sounded very...meaningful?

"Pay them no mind, they're laughing at the old woman," Wynne dismissed the jeers, and in the dim light of the evening Harvey had to admit she was still very handsome, despite her age.

Oh well, of course, he sighed internally. Thankfully there existed worse things than a few rumors starring tents, a young man and a late hour. Dear Maker.

>>>X<<<

He managed to get the second and at the same time the last thing done before he was picked up by a stern looking, older Warden, who guided him--more like led--to the old ruins where the rest of the recruits prepared themselves to undertake the Joining. Walking up the cracked stone stairs he fixed the Cousland sword, the blade once again burdening his back, and turned around just to see if the man was still standing there. He was, and his eyes spoke much of finality.

Harvey wondered if another half an hour more would've had him branded a deserter. He shook his head. He'd read a few Grey Warden legends, but nothing gave any hints as to this paranoia.

He entered a large niche, relieved that apparently the Ritual itself hadn't started yet... or maybe they were simply waiting for him to show up? The recruits lumped together in a small circle by one of the columns, and turned his way when he approached. From the look on their faces the rogue gathered that he missed something crucial. Ser Jory was as pale as a ghost, and Daveth's lips formed a thin line--but the thief himself seemed determined, and so was Trinne.

He had to ask. "Did Duncan finally say what this Joining is all about?"

Daveth scratched his head, a shadow of his earlier good mood still present in his eyes. "In short, we take the ritual and either we make it..."
Harvey suddenly felt very tired. It had been a long day. "Or we don't?"

"...or we don't." The swarthy rogue echoed, index finger mocking a blade across his throat.

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"Wonderful." Cousland sounded roughly as thrilled about the Joining as Jory had. Not that his reaction surprised Trinne. She'd been expecting something like that. The rogue sighed and raised his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. "Let's get on with it..."

Trinne cocked an eyebrow behind the young noble's back. He might not sound overjoyed about the nature of the Wardens' ritual, but he wasn't dragging his heels like the knight.

Duncan nodded his thanks to the older Warden who had 'escorted' Cousland to the stone-floored niche and waited for the man to take his leave before striding slowly, deliberately, toward the stone table and the ominously large chalice that sat alone on its surface. "At last we come to the Joining. Grey Wardens were founded during the first Blight, when humanity stood on the verge of annihilation. So it was that the first of our order drank of darkspawn blood, and mastered their Taint."

They...what?! Trinne's eyes widened in shock, but Jory beat her to voiced disbelief at the thought they'd have to drink the blood of those monsters.

Duncan appeared unperturbed by their dismay. "As the first Grey Wardens did before us, as we did before you. This is the source of our power, and our victory."

"Those who survive the Joining become immune to the Taint," Alistair chimed in, shooting her a mildly sympathetic look. "We can sense it in the darkspawn, and use it to slay the archdemon."

His first three words ran a loop inside Trinne's head. **Those who survive.** It was quickly becoming inescapably clear that this was not simply a risky adventure, a glorious quest against monsters like in her books. This was an all or nothing, life or death roll of the dice. This was--literally--betting her life that Duncan's offer was a safer option than Greagoir's wrath. The thought was sobering enough the mage found herself unconsciously reaching for Daveth's hand as the senior Warden explained that this was why the rite was kept secret.

The archer seemed startled as her fingers brushed his, but he was quick to offer a reassuring smile and squeeze her hand all the same.

_We can do this_, Trinne promised herself, squeezing back.

"We speak only a few words prior to the Joining," Duncan said gravely. "But they have been said since the first." He looked over at the junior Warden. "Alistair, if you would, please?"

The blond warrior nodded, lowering his gaze to the stone floor as if praying before he began. "Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten. And that one day, we shall join you."

As the words faded into silence, Duncan picked up the chalice and turned to face the recruits. "Daveth, step forward."

The thief gave Trinne's hand one last squeeze before relinquishing his grip and moving to accept the heavy chalice. He shot her a wink before he raised the goblet to his lips and drank.
Trinne couldn't help but bite her lip and pray. Please, Maker, don't leave me with just Cousland and the templar. Please please please. Much like her many, many whispered pleas to get out of tests or trouble, the Maker didn't see fit to grant the silent request.

Duncan barely had time to get a firm grip on the chalice before the archer doubled over, a guttural cry of pain--agony, really--tearing its way up his throat.

"Maker's breath!" Jory gasped, and Trinne had to fight the urge to swear herself as Daveth crumpled to the ground, and she couldn't do a damn thing to help him.

It wasn't until the swarthy thief lay silent and still--dead, Trinne forced numbed mind to accept--that Duncan spoke again. "I am sorry, Daveth." His gaze shifted to the next recruit. "Step forward, Jory."

The big man flinched, backed away, his hand groping for the hilt of his sword as he protested, "But... I have a wife, a child. Had I but known..."

"There is no turning back," Duncan warned sternly, his whole body tense as he set down the chalice. Trinne felt an aura of doom creeping in, but her words stuck in her throat when she tried to speak up.

"No, you ask too much," Jory asserted frantically, his sword coming free with a grating ring. "There is no glory in this!" He lunged forward, as if planning to charge right through the Grey Warden, but Duncan calmly drew a dagger from his belt, parried the clumsy, fear-driven stroke of the knight's greatsword and unflinchingly drove his blade into Jory's gut.

It took every scrap of willpower Trinne possessed to calm the magic that flared toward her fingertips in that single shocking moment.

"What kind of man are you?!" she wondered as she watched the Warden catch Jory's body and gently lower the dying knight to the cobblestones. He'd been kind to her on the journey from the Circle to Highever, but then practically blackmailed Cousland into joining, and now this... it was a jarring contradiction, to say the least.

As was the sincere apology Duncan murmured as he rose, Jory's blood still freckling his gauntlets. "But the Joining is not yet complete." He returned to the table, picked up the goblet once again, and headed for her. "You are called upon to submit yourself to the Taint, for the greater good."

Trinne didn't even consider resisting as he extended the chalice toward her. She took it, glancing at the three men who stood around her. Cousland looked grim, resigned. Alistair seemed like he was trying not to be hopeful, and Duncan was as implacable and unperturbed as he had been at the beginning of the Ritual.

It was Alistair she chose to focus on as she raised the chalice, Alistair's hopeful-despite-his-best-efforts eyes that gave her courage to drink the vile concoction that half-filled the vessel. He wanted her to survive, though she wasn't entirely sure why.

"From this moment forth, you are a Grey Warden," Duncan informed her somberly as he took back the goblet.

Darkness and pain swallowed her, burning away until all she could see was a roaring dragon and sickly green flames.

"You are called upon to submit yourself to the taint." The formula was repeated in the cold evening.

The rogue swallowed, but it didn't help his clenched throat. He was going to die here. The certainty of that weighed at his core like lead.
air, Duncan's face still unreadable under the solemn mask he'd been wearing since the beginning of the ritual. The chalice was now extended in Harvey's direction—a promise as final as a tip of any sword aimed at one's throat.

The noble met the older man's dark eyes and a spark of anger fought the rising panic. He held onto that feeling and stoked it like a sizzling coal— the loathing he felt for Rendon Howe, the anger towards his father for letting Duncan Conscript him in the first place, and at himself for simply not wandering off while he was still in Korcari Wilds. But most of all the recent one, the anger he felt towards the Wardens and the pool of blood now staining the stone pavement, bodies of the two failed warden recruits laying there as they fell. None of them knew they'd face something beyond their control, not Daveth, not Ser Jory, and not Trinne, who was still unconscious, propped against a stone column where Alistair left her.

It became a shield protecting him from the itching he felt in his legs, screaming to go for it, just a few yards, you'll lose them in the forest of tents and you'll be in the clear.

How does one fight a roll of dice?

He silently held Duncan's gaze, and felt a twinge of satisfaction seeing both wardens tense when he reached for the sword hanging on his back. But no, Harvey wasn't stupid, and the Warden Commander's hands carried death in more ways than one—poor Jory got a taste of that. The sword came off, still hidden in its scabbard.

"Hold this," the rogue offered the blade to Alistair. Duncan knew what this sword was, and Harvey already made arrangements earlier to have it delivered to Fergus—waiting for him in Wardens' vault inside one of the tents, in case the younger brother never returned from the Wilds; as measly consolation as it was in the face of lost family and home. He hesitated when the blade was changing owners, his fingers not quite ready to let go yet, but what's done is done. He silently said his goodbyes.

Trying to keep his hands from shaking too much while picking up the silver cup, his gaze wandered in the direction of the mage girl. Still sleeping, her eyes danced under the eyelids, dreaming. Alive.

The metal felt cold on his lips. Foul tasting potion traveled down his throat and he felt a shadow of relief—be it because at least she was alright, or because all of this was finally over, he couldn't tell.

Then sticky darkness took him.
Trinne's return to the land of the living was only pleasant in that she finally got away from the damned terrifying dragon. She crashed back to consciousness abruptly, violently pitching forward and wondering who was responsible for the scream ringing in her ears as someone caught her arm.

"Trinne." Alistair's face came into focus, his grip tightening on her arm.

"What?" she croaked grumpily, realizing with a start that the scream had been her own.

"Are you alright?" he asked with genuine concern.

"I just drank poison and had the worst dream I've ever had in my life," she rasped, pulling her arm free and struggling to her feet. "I'm bloody peachy, thanks for asking." She glanced over at the rogue standing behind Alistair. Figures I'd wind up stuck with him, rather than Daveth... Not that she would wish death on anyone, no matter how much she might dislike him personally, but it was just her luck Cousland survived when the archer didn't.

"So you had the dreams?" Alistair asked, still frowning in concern. "I had terrible dreams after my Joining."

"Is... is that what was with the damn dragon?" Trinne demanded, rubbing her forehead.

Alistair and Duncan exchanged a look. "Yes. That was the archdemon."

"That's the thing we have to kill?! Not looking forward to that," she muttered. Cousland's brow wrinkled ever so slightly in confusion and she shot the noble a disbelieving look. "What, you didn't see it?"

He shook his head.

"Not every recruit does," Duncan interjected, and the mage redirected her glare toward toward him. "There are... differing experiences, depending on the person. The side effects can vary as well."

"Side effects," Trinne repeated, forcing all the emotion out of her voice. Blowing up at her commanding officer was probably not the best way to start things. Especially since she'd all but fallen to her knees thanking the man for getting her out of that bloody tower.

The Senior Warden nodded. "Indeed. These and many other things can be explained to you in the days to come. For now, take a moment or two to recover, if you need, and then join us at the king's council down the stairs." He gestured toward the nearby stone steps.

The mage gave a distracted nod, rubbing her forehead absently. Dear Maker, what have I gotten myself into this time? She did take Duncan up on his offer of a few moments to collect herself, bracing one hand against the stone wall as she watched the men head down the stairs. Her head still hurt, her throat burned with the aftertaste of her scream and whatever the sod it was she drank, and the mental image of the bloody huge dragon refused to fade.

Her forehead came to rest against cool stone just above her hand, and the mage took several deep breaths, in an attempt to more firmly anchor herself to reality. She hated how hard and how long the Fade always clung to her when she woke up.

This is worse than after my Harrowing, Trinne grumbled to herself. That made things ten times
worse. Remembering her Harrowing, especially the end of it, meant remembering Jowan. Which in turn meant digging up a whole world of pain she was trying her damnedest to bury and forget. Her free hand curled into a fist and Trinne swore under her breath. This was the last thing she needed. "Getting stuck with Cousland and a templar wasn't enough; you hafta give me a guilt trip, too?!" she grumbled to silent and unhearing skies. However, her irritation at her circumstances was enough to quell the last of the nausea, and Trinne pushed away from the wall. She ran her fingers through her hair, as if hoping to gather courage from between snarled black strands, and gave a disgruntled sigh when only leaves and dirt shook free.

"Alright, then," she said aloud to no one in particular. "Let's get on with this."

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The strategy meeting was already underway when she reached the table, Cailan doggedly clinging to some strategy that his general didn't like. "My decision is final, Loghain. I will stand by the Grey Wardens in this assault."

The dark-haired older man shook his head in disgust. "You risk too much, Cailan. The darkspawn horde is too dangerous for you to be playing hero on the front lines."

"If that's the case, perhaps we should wait for the Orlesian forces to join us after all," the king countered as Trinne circled the table to join Duncan and Cousland.

"I must repeat my protest to your fool notion that we need the Orlesians to defend ourselves!" Loghain grumbled.

"It is not a fool notion," Cailan shot back, reminding Trinne of herself when she was younger, stomping her foot and arguing semantics to get her way. "Our arguments with Orlesians are a thing of the past... and you will remember who is king!"

Trinne actually winced. Nice, your Majesty. Play the 'I'm in charge' card in hopes no one will call you out on marginalizing the Orlesian occupation...

Loghain apparently shared her disbelief at the description. "How fortunate Maric did not live to see his son ready to hand Ferelden over to those who enslaved us for a century!" he growled.

"Then our current forces will have to suffice, won't they?" Cailan retorted smugly. "Duncan, are your men ready for battle?"

"They are, your Majesty," the senior Warden nodded.

Cailan's gaze slid over to Trinne. "And this is one of the recruits I met earlier on the road? I understand congratulations are in order."

The mage darted a glance toward her fellow new Warden and wondered why the king was paying her more heed. In most situations, a noble ranks way higher than a mage... "T-Thank you, ser. I... I don't feel that special," she admitted, clearing her throat sheepishly. Maybe when the headache goes away...

"Oh, but you are," Cailan contradicted her. "Every Grey Warden is needed now more than ever."

"Your fascination with glory and legends will be your undoing, Cailan," Loghain snorted. "We must attend to reality."

"Fine, fine," the young king sighed, leaning forward to study the map spread across the table. "Speak
your strategy. The Grey Wardens and I draw the darkspawn into charging our lines and then...?"

Trinne shamelessly tuned out the rest, figuring she'd heard enough. She used the intervening minutes to sneak glances at Cousland when he wasn't looking. He didn't seem to care in the least about the king outright ignoring him—if anything he looked relieved. But then, he was a rogue, and they in general tended to survive off not being the center of attention. Unlike her.

She was yanked back to reality by Duncan's elbow nudging her side; just in time to hear Cailan decide to send "Alistair and the new Grey Wardens" off to do something.

"Sorry?" she managed when the monarch looked at her expectantly.

"We need the three of you to light the beacon in the Tower of Ishal," Cailan repeated for her.

"Oh. S-Sure," she nodded, before realizing what that meant. "Wait. I won't get to be in the battle. We're getting sent off like bloody errand boys, away from one of the biggest damn battles of our time, and I just said Sure. What the Fade is wrong with you, Trinne Amell?!"

Cousland didn't appear to share her disgust at the less than glorious assignment; in fact he actually seemed happier with the task.

A man who's not a glory hound. I may die of shock.

Alistair rejoined the group as they neared the Wardens' bonfire, just in time to hear Duncan reiterate their mission. "Wait... you mean I won't be in the battle?"

Duncan turned at the blond's outburst and gave him a stern look. "This is by the king's personal request, Alistair. If that beacon is not lit, Teyrn Loghain's men won't know when to charge."

"So he needs three Grey Wardens up there holding the torch. Just in case, right?" Alistair deadpanned.

"I'm with him," Trinne muttered. "I'd rather be in the thick of things."

"That is not your choice," Duncan shot her down. "If King Cailan wishes Grey Wardens to ensure the beacon is lit, Grey Wardens will be there. We must do whatever it takes to defeat the darkspawn, exciting or no."

"I get it, I get it," Alistair sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Just so you know, if the king ever asks me to put on a dress and dance the Remigold, I'm drawing the line. Darkspawn or no."

Trinne snorted. "I'd love to see that." The mental image alone is priceless.

Alistair quirked a grin at her. "Well, for you, maybe. But it would have to be a pretty dress."

Trinne raised an eyebrow and stifled a giggle. "I'll keep that in mind, pretty boy."

Duncan cleared his throat. "The tower is on the far side of the gorge, near where we arrived. We will signal you when the time is right." He nodded at the ex-templar. "Alistair knows what to look for."

"Fine. We know what we have to do," Trinne conceded, swallowing questions of whether they could the battle after, or if they'd have to babysit the damned beacon.

"Good. Then I must join the others. From here, the three of you are on your own," he reminded them sternly, glancing at Trinne and Cousland. "Remember that you are both Grey Wardens now. I expect you to be worthy of that title."
Right. Not too much pressure or anything, the mage grumbled mentally as Duncan took his leave. Not to mention we could prove our worth better if you let us be in the battle... But the king and the senior Warden had been adamant.

So tower it was.

>>X<<

Harvey caught up with Duncan as the man was leaving premises of the ruined temple. Upon hearing his name the commander turned around --looking far from ecstatic-- and Harvey felt a bit like a chore; already crossed off of the to do list, and yet still demanding attention.

"Yes? Was something unclear?" Duncan inquired, and though his tone was as pleasant as the rogue expected, he could tell the man was clearly in a hurry. He decided not to waste too much of his time.

"No. I mean... have you seen my mabari hound, maybe?" The noble has been fidgeting through most of the war meeting, ever since a dog shaped hole filtered through the haze of tension surrounding the ritual. *How could he forget about her?*

Duncan shifted slightly and Harvey silently said goodbye to getting a straight answer.

"I'm afraid she chose to wander off," the dark skinned man admitted, regretfully shaking his head. "Where to, I am unable to say."

"I left her in your care!" the rogue protested sharply, because for one he was finally fed up, and second, it was easier to be angry at someone other than yourself. It didn't last though--his brain kindly reminded he was close to throwing a temper tantrum in front of his superior, and shame caused him to compose himself quickly.

"And she gave it up the moment you disappeared from view." Duncan didn't even make the effort of raising his voice at the outburst, not looking remotely guilt ridden. And maybe rightfully so, well trained hounds were supposed to listen to their owners, and Harvey specifically told Frida to stay at the man's side. Duncan's fault in the matter was none.

The noble sighed and shook his head in defeat. "Fair enough." After all he couldn't expect the Warden Commander to play babysitter -- and Frida was always fond of getting misplaced, whether you tried to keep her around or not.

Concluding the conversation was over, Duncan excused himself. Harvey watched him disappear between the tents, the man's step still springy and graceful despite his age. He shuffled his own feet, a bit worried. He could be easily forgiven, the rogue mused, between the certainty he was going to die and the relief that he somehow didn't, one dog being overlooked didn't seem like a big deal. And it's not like she was the perfect hound either, listening only when it fit her, a dirty, slobbering ball of mischief and defiance, making his life difficult for what... three years now?

A sudden panicked whistle pierced the air, then another. Fingers nearing lips for the third time, Harvey silently prayed that his mabari felt more inclined to find her master here, than she was around Highever, where he might as well have been trying to summon a griffon.

Thankfully, his fears were quickly dispelled as a massive silhouette started in his direction--from somewhere quite near--with the grace of a drunken battering ram, managing to tip over quite a few people, even though at this hour the Ostagar camp was far from crowded. Maker knew she was
doing it on purpose.

Harvey let out a sigh of overwhelming relief--and then winced and decided to hide back in the alcove, hoping that curses thrown after the dog's trail wouldn't pinpoint her owner. A few seconds later Frida conquered the stairs with one giant leap and pounced in his direction.

Only a quick dodge allowed him to avoid getting buried under nearly two hundred pounds of dog.

"Frida, NO! We are not playing!"

She had to sense his bad mood because she paused, confused, and then almost headbutted him to the ground. Harvey caught her thick neck trying to regain balance, which somehow ended up in a hug. He buried his face in brown fur for a few moments--as usual, she smelled of wet dog and kaddis. And now he probably did, too.

"How much food did you steal this time?" Harvey asked his hound with a crooked smile. It was almost embarrassing how much he missed her.

Frida responded with a happy bark.

"Hey, you got your dog back!"

Frida perked up at the excited female voice and two breaths later she was sprawled in front of the approaching mage, asking for a belly rub--her master left behind, crouching alone on the ground.

"You are precious," Trinne cooed, humorizing his traitorous hound, and Harvey rolled his eyes, dully noting that this particular greeting involved no pushing, shoving nor even head-buttting. Indeed, his mabari was one of a kind.

With a sigh he dusted off his knees and wiped the kaddis off of his face--by experience he knew it was there--and joined the rest of his companions.

"Should we go to the tower now?" he asked.

Alistair silently faced the direction of the battlefield, apprehensive, and listened in the way he did in the Korcari wilds. Harvey still had no clue what the man's trick was. "Darkspawn are swarming - I think the battle is going to start soon anyways. We have no idea when King Cailan is going to need Loghain's troops, so I guess the sooner the better."

"Yeah, we should go," Trinne agreed and got up, to Frida's great dismay.

Both her and the warrior seemed far from thrilled, and Harvey made a subtle face, not wanting to believe he was the only one who didn't mind their mundane task. Why his companions would prefer to find themselves amidst dying screams and chopped off limbs was beyond him, but he guessed to each their own. Personally, he'd take the tower any day.

They'd already started walking when Alistair suddenly remembered. "Oh yes, I think you forgot something. Your sword?" He reminded, noticing Harvey's blank expression. He reached behind his back, fumbling with the belt.

That... the rogue's eyes traced the familiar handle--somehow the thought of it again burdening his back was weighting on his stomach like a dozen rocks. He shook his head distracted. "Keep it for
now," he asked quietly.

Alistair stopped unstrapping the blade, a little taken aback. "Oh well, why not? Becoming a packing mule was always my childhood dream."

Trinne snorted a laugh, and Harvey missed a step, guilty as charged. *That's not what he was implying at all... was it?* He forced himself to look the blond man in the eye. "I...no. That's not what I meant." But his tone came out apologetic—he couldn't help it, even if it unequivocally proved his intentions. He tried a more formal approach. "Borrow it if you will, until this fight is over. It's a good sword." Or at least a better one than the warrior was using at the moment. Harvey knew he couldn't deny that.

Alistair closed and opened his mouth a few times. "I was...kidding?" He rubbed his neck sheepishly. "It's really not a big deal, it's just one sword."

*Oh. Guess who was feeling like a fool.*

Harvey was unexpectedly saved by a pair of female hands pushing them both in the direction of the exit.

"Boys, boys, I'm happy you're making friends, but I'm pretty sure we've got work to do?" Trinne hurried them up, impatient. Suddenly the ground shook, ballistas or spells at work—only the Maker knew—and Harvey had to concede the point.

The four of them ran towards the bridge.
It was funny how difficult simple things were when someone was--albeit indirectly--out for your blood, Trinne mused. Crossing a bridge, for instance. It was an easy thing, or should have been. It had taken her all of twenty seconds to accomplish earlier. Of course, there hadn't been catapults and soldiers to dodge, or twisted monsters hurling fiery rocks involved then, either. The mage cursed as the shuddering impact of another projectile sent her to her knees again. Alistair was the only one who managed to keep his feet, close enough to the parapet he was tossed into the low wall rather than to the ground.

Trinne winced as the warrior offered her a hand up, knees and wrists already aching--this was her third such tumble in the past minute. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Alistair muttered, stepping forward a pace or two to haul Cousland to his feet as well. "Come on, we need to keep moving. They're depending on us."

The three of them--well, four, if you counted the adorable, staff-stealing ball of fur and slobber sticking to Cousland like a shadow--made it across the rest of the bridge before another flaming boulder could jar them from their feet again. That was where things got really fun.

>>X<<

The soldier scrambling down the path that led to their destination barely waited to come to a halt before demanding, "You... You're Grey Wardens, aren't you? The tower, it's been taken!"

Trinne fought the urge to scream, Alistair's spine snapped straight, and Cousland let out a resigned sigh, as if he'd been expecting a complication of some sort.

*You can't tell me you saw this coming...* she thought to herself as Alistair demanded an explanation of the fleeing guard.

"Th-They came up through the ground in the lower chambers," the man faltered. "They're everywhere; we were overwhelmed."

Alistair shook his head. "Then we'll just have to get to the beacon and light it ourselves."

"Good luck with that," the soldier snorted. "Didn't you hear me? There's darkspawn sodding everywhere!"

The warrior gave him a thin smile. "Yes, and we're Grey Wardens. Fighting them's our job description."

Trinne bit back a laugh and decided maybe she didn't totally hate the ex-templar.

"Do what you like," the guard muttered. "Fightin' those things isn't in my job description."

*Actually, tonight it is,* Trinne resisted the urge to point out. "Whatever. Which way's the tower?"

"Follow me," Alistair said, drawing his sword and heading back up the path the soldier had just descended.

>>X<<

Whatever fear he may have been feeling, the soldier hadn't exaggerated. The darkspawn really were
everywhere. Blocking the path, hidden alongside it, charging the soldiers who hadn't been cowardly enough—or smart enough, depending on your view—to run for it. The sense of their presence was nearly overwhelming, and it was a struggle to focus enough to actually cast anything.

*Is this one of those side effects Duncan mentioned?* Trinne wondered as she tried to force the chittering to the back of her mind so she could help. Not that Alistair or Cousland really needed her help; they were both managing just fine. Better than fine, she corrected as Alistair took out two of the creatures in a handful of seconds, moving forward even before the corpses had hit the ground. Cousland wasn't far behind him, displaying an almost uncanny knowledge of weak points and using them to his advantage. If he could hear the relentless mental chatter of the darkspawn, it wasn't slowing *him* down any.

She was glad things were going so well for them. Between the darkspawn chatter in her head and the rain and wind in her face, it was proving difficult enough to avoid getting hit, let alone do any damage of her own. She did finally manage to get off a lightning bolt, the energy crackling bad-temperedly as it left her staff and flew hissing into a genlock that had appeared from behind a half-collapsed wall. The creature had probably intended to ambush Alistair as the warrior focused a little too intently on his target. Trinne smirked as her spell put an emphatic end to that. The genlock fell, twitching, even as Alistair's sword separated a hurlock's head from its shoulders. He flinched at the keening cry behind him and spun around.

The mage grinned at him. "You owe me one, Templar."

He looked ready to protest the title, but shook his head slightly. "Thanks. You alright?"

"Yeah." Trinne raked chapped fingers through damp hair. "Just getting used to fighting with a group still." *And with this infernal buzzing in my skull.* She glanced at where Cousland was rifling through the belt pouches of the darkspawn they'd just defeated. Most of what he found he left alone, expression of distaste flickering across his face, but occasionally he would pull something free—coins or a vial that he wrapped in cloth before pocketing.

Frida came charging back from wherever she'd gotten to, barking fit to wake the dead. The mabari nearly knocked her owner over as she skidded to a halt, stubby tail wagging furiously.

"What?" the noble muttered, trying not to lose his balance during repeated and insistent nudging from the dog.

Frida barked and danced toward the inclined pathway and the archway at the top.

"Alright, alright, we're coming..." He roughed the mabari's ear as he stood and Trinne couldn't help a small smile as they pressed on.

>>X<<

It was more of the same all the way up to the tower door; fight some darkspawn, make sure they didn't have anything worth keeping, pause just long enough to catch their breath, keep going. Fortunately, it was not a process they had to repeat too many times; though each repetition found them working better as a team. Trinne learned to start with weakness spells—the more darkspawn she could snare the better—Cousland went right for whatever weak spots he could reach, and Alistair and Frida wreaked havoc on the weakened and bleeding monsters.

It was, Trinne realized, a modified version of their method of attack from the Wilds, a fact that made her miss Daveth all over again. She shook her head and focused on the task at hand as Alistair shoved open the tower door. *He's gone, Trinne. Get over it.*
It wasn't until the door clanged shut it sank in she didn't just mean Daveth.

>>X<<

"Wait, shouldn't we at least look for reinforcements?"

Trinne rolled her eyes at Cousland's question. "Yeah, because we have so much extra time, and there were just scads of soldiers still alive out there."

He glared at her, obviously not appreciating sarcasm at a time like this. "Five minutes isn't going to kill us!"

"Um, guys?" Alistair tried, shoulder pressed against the door to keep it closed.

"Actually, if the darkspawn have some back way into the tower, it could kill us," she argued, crossing her arms and glaring right back. "The odds'll tip even more in their favor the longer we take!"

"All the more reason to have reinforcements," the noble shot back, eyes narrowing. "I'd rather not go up against a small horde with just the four of us!"

Trinne growled, wondering how much of an earful Alistair would give her if she strangled Cousland somewhere in the next few seconds. "You are some kind of damn coward, aren't you?!"

He snorted. "Yes, if not flinging myself headfirst into something that could get us killed makes me a coward."

"GUYS!" Alistair barked, desperation underlying the word. "Little help?" The door shuddered and jolted inwards as mage and rogue turned to look. "We need to bar the door. Now." He nodded toward the wide, flat beam that served that purpose.

Eyeing each other with something that edged past 'dislike' but wasn't quite 'hate', mage and rogue picked up the beam and dropped it into the supporting notches. Alistair stepped away from the door, still tense and on the alert. "Well, that should hold them for now. But we better get moving."

"Oh, cheer up, Cousland," Trinne commented to the morose noble. "I told you it was too late, anyway."

He shot her a dark look before turning to Alistair. "At least tell me you know your way around?"

The ex-templar shrugged. "Just bits of the first floor from doing errands. It's not like they gave tours or anything."

"Well, from what I can see, this tower's architecture is Tevinter," Trinne mused, studying the carvings etched into the walls and doorways. "That means it's designed to go up in a spiral." She swirled a finger in the air to demonstrate. Warrior and rogue booth stared at her unhappily.

"That means--"

"No shortcuts," she confirmed with a dark smile as she slipped back her hood and raked away locks of her hair plastered to her face by rain. "We hafta go through the whole thing."

"Lovely," Alistair grunted, rolling his shoulders. He hadn't even completed the motion when he twitched and swore under his breath.
"What?" Trinne arched an eyebrow at the uncomfortable expression on the man's face.

"I... got rain water down the back of my armor," the warrior sighed. "It's cold."

It took less than two seconds for Trinne to lose her fight with a giggle. "Poor baby. Whatever shall you do?"

He shot her a dark look but didn't retort.

Cousland sighed, shifting his weight from one foot to the other impatiently. "Don't we need to get moving...?"

"Yes, of course," Alistair conceded sheepishly. "You're right. So... onward and upward."

Trinne snickered at the phrasing. No, Trinne he's a templar. You don't want to like him...

I can't help it, part of her argued back. He's nothing like the templars at the Circle. Maybe this particular templar's not so bad? She shook her head at herself; wording it like a question. She'd only known the man a matter of hours, but he absolutely lacked the air of... piety, of conviction that all the templars she'd met had. So, yes, he was different. How different was something she'd just have to wait to find out. Trinne scowled as the headed through the doorway that led to the first floor's main room. She wasn't particularly fond of waiting.

The chittering vertigo that pulled on the edges of her senses was back with a vengeance as they entered the room. More darkspawn. Lovely.

Frida growled, ears laying back against her skull and hackles rising as she sensed that there was something dangerous in the room ahead. She charged off, intent on protecting her humans most likely--Trinne couldn't shake the feeling the dog had adopted her and Alistair as secondary charges--and only slowed slightly as she passed between two of the support pillars. She shortened her stride to hop over something that Trinne couldn't see, but Cousland frowned.

"Hold on a minute..." he muttered, kneeling next to one of the pillars. It took him less than the requested minute to disarm the tripwire, dagger cutting through the thin and rusty wire, rendering the hasty and somewhat clumsy trap useless.

"Well, I guess you're good for something after all, Cousland," Trinne ribbed playfully, breezing past the noble as he stood. The darkspawn had erected sections of rough wood palisade wall to act as barriers, funneling attackers around the curve of the wall, but she could still see a pair of hurlock archers, one too busy fighting off Cousland's mabari to be any threat, and the other nocking an arrow. She yelped a warning as the flaming shaft missed her by mere inches--I do not want to get shot again!--and began working on a lightning spell to retaliate.

"Watch out!" Alistair's shout caught her off-guard as the warrior lunged forward, grabbing her arm and dragging her close so fast it knocked the wind out of her when her back hit his chest. His shield rose to block something in the same moment he crouched, pulling her with him, but Trinne couldn't see what with his armor in the way.

The fireball hit the ground behind them even as she opened her mouth to rip him a new one for interrupting her while she was casting. OH. The mage decided to keep the acidic commentary to herself. It wasn't the first time she'd had a spell misfire on her, though it was the first time said spell had been primal. Her arms hurt. A tingling pain that had her fingertips numb while everything else up to her elbows was beyond sensitive. Trinne gritted her teeth and resolved to ignore it as Alistair helped her to her feet.
"You alright?" the warrior asked, honest but rushed concern in his voice.

She nodded, still dazed from the fireball's resultant shockwave. "'M fine. You?"

"Prob'ly wind up with an awful rash from the heat, but it's better than dead," he shrugged, the emissary responsible demanding his attention before she could reply.

Trinne glanced back to make sure Cousland was alright before she followed the warrior's lead. It looked like the pillars and the large, semi-destroyed statue of Andraste had mostly shielded the rogue from any damage. She caught his gaze and raised one eyebrow in a silent double-check that he was okay, and he responded with single, curt nod. Satisfied that they were all alive and well, for now at least, she risked a glance down at her arms as she moved to have a clear view of the remaining hurlock archers. Her sleeves were singed--the left far worse than the right--and the skin underneath was red and severely blistered from the backlash of the spell Alistair interrupted. *I'll take care of it when we're done,* she promised herself, hoping the lessons from Wynne had been sufficient to heal these injuries.

Alistair cried out in pain as the emissary fought back, its spell leeching life from the warrior to strengthen the darkspawn mage. Trinne growled and muttered under her breath as she threw a lightning spell at the emissary. It provided enough distraction to give Alistair an opening to behead the creature, and he nodded his thanks as the two of them turned to help Cousland and Frida take care of the archers. There was only one left, and by the time Alistair reached it, Trinne had slowed it with a disorientation spell and Cousland had driven a dagger through a gap in the creature's armor to finish it off.

The three of them stood there for a minute, catching their breath. Trinne was the first one to break; the burns on her arms stinging like mad. She slung her staff on her back and pushed up her sleeves, wincing as ragged fabric dragged across sensitive skin. Alistair's head spun in her direction when she didn't quite swallow the pained whimper at the sensation.

"I thought you said you were fine!" He frowned in consternation as he eyed her forearms. "I'm sorry, I tried--"

"People lie," Trinne cut him off, more sharply than she'd meant to, biting her lip as she concentrated on the healing spell she was attempting to summon. "Besides, this isn't from the emissary," she explained. "You protected me just fine. Thanks for that, by the way."

"You're welcome. What're those from then? They didn't magically appear out of thin air."

She sighed. "You're looking at the results of an interrupted lighting spell that got cut off before I could channel it away from me. Just some minor burns." Minor burns that, despite her best efforts, refused to more than half-heal.

"Lightning?" The warrior's head cocked to the side. "So when I grabbed you.... I did that?!!"

"Alistair, like you said, it's better than being dead. You sort of saved my life in the process, so this?"--she held up still-red arms--"Not a big deal. I can still cast spells, and I'm sure they'll stop hurting eventually." He looked unsure, so she tossed out the first comment she could think of, spurred on by the vandalized statue in the middle of the room. "Some redecorating job for a last minute invasion, huh? That dragon-y stuff looks like what they did to the statues in the Wilds." She frowned as a thought occurred to her. "Do they... worship the archdemon? They didn't strike me as intelligent enough for that."

Alistair shrugged as they prepared to move on. "Intelligence, instinct... call it whichever you like."
Even the senior Wardens don't really know what's going on inside their heads. Maybe they just have a thing for the color red. And pointy skull-thingys."

Trinne eyed him dubiously. "You're... kidding?" I hope.

He just offered another shrug and a lopsided half-smirk as he headed through the doorway after Cousland and Frida.

The mage made a strangling motion behind his back and rolled her eyes as she brought up the rear. "Hey, Cousland..."

The rogue cut her off with a shushing noise. "The corridor might be clear, but I can't say the same about the rooms." He glanced at Alistair. "I don't suppose there's another way to get to the stairs?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Cousland sighed. "Well, this just keeps getting better and better..."

Trinne wondered for a second if his 'Grey Warden senses', or whatever you wanted to call them, were settling in better than hers. Probably are, lucky bastard. The Joining hadn't seemed to hit him as hard as it had her. "So, then, what do we do?" she hissed in a whisper, scratching behind Frida's ears as the hound plopped down between mage and rogue.

"I'm... not sure," Alistair admitted with a shrug. "We have to go through that room and the one next to it to get to the stairs. So anybody have any ideas for dealing with whatever we find in there?"

"Whaddya mean 'whatever we find in there'?" Trinne demanded. "Can't you tell?!!"

"I know it's darkspawn, and a good number of them," Alistair retorted. "But I haven't exactly been a Warden long enough to give you a head count or anything."

"Well, are there any more powerful ones in there, like the emissary?" she probed, planting her hands on her hips as Frida wandered off. "Can you at least tell that much?"

"I can, and I... don't think there are," the warrior whispered. "Just the rank and file grunts. There's plenty of them, but we should be able to handle them. If we manage to work together without killing each other. And come up with a plan."

"Oh, is that all?" The mage arched an eyebrow skeptically.

"It's not that hard," Cousland interjected. "Or did you miss the fact we've been working together since the Joining and you haven't killed us yet?"

"Me?!" Trinne hissed, feeling the sparks of anger build into very real sparks at her fingertips. Then it hit her. "You're still pissed about the lightning? Wow, Cousland, seriously. I. Didn't. Hit you."

"All I'm saying is if you were a little... less rash, maybe there would be fewer instances of my life flashing before my eyes!"

"Poor baby--" Trinne's mock sympathy was interrupted by a crash as Frida decided she was tired of listening to them bicker and headbutted open a door, gleefully charging the creatures inside with a ferocious growl.

"FRIDA!!" the noble groaned, daggers already in hand as he turned to chase after his dog.

"Now who's the rash one?" Trinne couldn't help smirking.
The rogue shot her a dark look and growled in frustration. "...Let's go."

"No time for plans now," Alistair commented, settling his shield on his arm. "Come on!"

The three of them hurried to catch up to the mabari, Trinne taking advantage of the way the darkspawn had clustered to stun them all with a spell. The telekinetic burst took a lot of energy to summon and left her dizzy. Fortunately, her vulnerable moment didn't last long, and she was hurling lightning spells at the darkspawn before they recovered. Part of her was tempted to send one sizzling over Cousland's shoulder again, just because she knew it bugged him. But the middle of combat wasn't the time to be petty, and she wasn't going to stoop so low, entertaining as the idea might be. So she behaved herself.

For all their grumbling—not mention whatever personal animosity they felt—they really were starting to get the hang of working as a team. A fact Trinne was extremely grateful for when one of the hurlocks slammed its shield into her chest hard enough to knock her on her ass and drive the air from her lungs. Cousland buried a dagger in the side of the thing's neck before it could follow up the attack with anything more deadly.

"Thanks," Trinne managed breathlessly, wincing and pressing a hand to her ribs as she struggled to her feet. *Yeeehaaaa, somethin' broke...*

He shrugged and muttered, "Owed you for the Wilds," before turning his attention to the knot of genlocks attempting to mob his dog.

Casting with most-likely broken ribs hurt, but the mage forced herself to ignore the throbbing ache as she spat out a spell to weaken the pair of hurlocks who had ganged up on Alistair. She wouldn't be able to concentrate on healing until the darkspawn were all dead, anyway. Fortunately, that was a goal that didn't take long to accomplish. As Alistair and Cousland quickly checked the fallen creatures for anything worth salvaging, Trinne turned her attention to herself.

It took a minute to remember the spell Wynne had taught her for diagnosing basic injuries, but the result following the muttered syllables was worth the extra thought. Her ribs weren't broken; the sort of thing where the bones were actually in pieces. They'd just come awful close. *Me and my habit of assuming the worst...* She sighed in relief as she murmured a healing spell to repair what damage there was.

"You alright?" Alistair checked, frowning in surprise as he pulled a shining silver bracelet from the belt pouch of a decapitated hurlock.

"Yeah," Trinne nodded. "Thought I'd busted a couple ribs, but turned out to not be as bad as I thought. Good thing, too; I dunno if I'm good enough to actually heal broken bones yet."

"Well, hopefully, we won't have to find out for a good long while." The warrior stood and handed her the bracelet. "Here."

"Hopefully--" She blinked, caught off guard. "What's this for?"

"I think it'll fit you better than me," he grinned. "Besides, silver's totally not my color."

She couldn't resist giggling, despite the macabre surroundings, as they moved on.

>>X<<

The giggle turned into a meaningful look shot at Cousland when they entered the next room. A tunnel mouth larger than the Harrowing chamber gaped through the floor. *Back way in. I told you so,
Ser Let's-get-reinforcements. And we're managing just fine with the four of us.

If the noble felt her gaze on him, or guessed at the mental boasting, it didn't show. He just ignored her. Which was fine with her.

The next room held only a few genlocks, guarding the first flight of stairs. They were rather easily dispatched, a good thing given how much trouble even getting this far had already been. Trinne eyed the stairs with distaste. *With what we've had to fight so far, I don't think I even wanna know what's up there...*

Regardless, she knew she would very shortly find out.
It was as they made their way up the stairs that Alistair gave voice to what had been Trinne’s silent complaint since they encountered that damn soldier. "Maker’s breath! What are all these darkspawn doing away from the rest of the horde? There wasn't supposed to be any resistance here!"

"This is a problem for you, why?" Cousland pointed out before Trinne could open her mouth to agree. "Weren't you two upset about not getting to be in the battle?"

"Hey, I guess you're right," the warrior chuckled. "there is a silver lining here if y' think about it. Let's get to the beacon. Loghain needs to know when to charge."

The door at the top of the stairs opened into an empty room. Trinne nearly lost what little she'd eaten that day at the smell, and came even closer when she realized what was responsible for said smell.

None of the corpses that littered the floor were whole, and all of them were human. One hand pressed against her stomach as the mage stared in horror. Watching soldiers get struck down by these monsters was bad enough, but this--missing limbs, ripped open torsos, crushed skulls... this was even worse.

Almost as if sensing her knees about to give out, Alistair grabbed her arm to hold her up. "You alright?"

"Give-Gimme a second," she managed, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. The stench was still there, but without the visible carnage, she managed to steady herself. "Do they always do...this?" she asked as they cautiously crossed the room.

"Usually, yes," the warrior confirmed.

"Well, looks like I'm gonna hafta work on havin' a stronger stomach," Trinne muttered.

"Probably a good idea, yes," Alistair smiled as he adjusted his shield and scanned the area ahead of them. "Okay, with where I'm sensing the most darkspawn on this level, it's probably best if we go through there--" he pointed at one of the two side chambers that abutted the main room-- "and come at them from an angle where we have a better view of what we're gettin' in to. Just a suggestion..."

"But it's a good one," Trinne assured him. "Right, Cousland?" The question was more subtle jab--about what, she wasn't even sure--than honestly caring what his opinion was.

Which was a good thing, because the rogue just shrugged.

"Right, then..." Alistair muttered, heading for the door.

There were just two genlocks in the narrow room, and Alistair and Frida had finished them off before Trinne could even summon a spell. The group made their way through the door at the far end of the room, gaining access to the larger chamber without alerting the darkspawn to their presence. Trinne couldn't help gaping in dismay--though she did at least manage to keep quiet--when they were greeted by the sight of a ransacked bookcase, its treasures clawed and bloodstained in a haphazard pile on the floor. She wished there was time for her to look through the shredded mess and see if there were any that could be saved, but knew better than to ask. She did bend down and snatch up one tome that didn't look too badly damaged as they walked past, just because she couldn't help herself. The quick glance she snuck of the cover before stowing it in her pack hinted at it being a volume of Chantry history or something. I'll check it out more thoroughly later, the mage promised herself.
"Either of you know how to use those?" Alistair hissed, gesturing toward the pair of ballistae that sat roughly--not to mention conveniently--aimed at the darkspawn.

"Yes, but don't you?" Cousland whispered back.

"Yeah, but there's two of them and one of me," the warrior replied. "Can't operate both by myself."

"I'll take the other one," the noble conceded.

"While, what, I stand here and look pretty?" Trinne demanded in an undertone.

Cousland shot her a look of long-suffering not-quite-patience. "They're not that hard to figure out. You could help him."

"Okay, well, it still looks like an awful far shot. How d'we get them in range?" she pointed.

Frida solved that problem by charging forward, well into view of the waiting darkspawn, but then actually listening when her owner hissed out her name in an attempt to recall the enthusiastic mabari to his side. The following darkspawn were well in range of the ballista bolts.

Trinne smirked to herself as another idea how to contribute to this plan occurred to her. She murmured the words of a spell, hand curving under the ball of tan light that materialized. She cupped the light for a second, letting it grow, before throwing it toward the approaching group of hurlocks. Her timing couldn't have been better. The miasma flared out upon contact with the floor, slowing the darkspawn to a sluggish pace that would keep them in the ballistae's range longer.

"At least they're already loaded," Alistair commented. "Convenient." He yanked the release. The bolt soared free, spearing through one hurlock with enough force left over to pin the corpse through the shield arm of another hurlock standing behind it.

"Nice shot," Trinne chuckled, the shuddering *clank* of Cousland's ballista underlying her words. Reloading was a chore for both of the men, and there was barely time for them to each get off a second shot before the miasma she'd laid down wore off. Still, five of the attacking hurlocks were no longer in the picture--three already dead, two wounded. It took Frida all of five seconds to finish off the one on the ground, barely pausing in her charge toward the lines of genlock archers. Alistair made short work of the creature that had remained standing, deflecting a clumsy blow made with an injured arm and driving his sword into the monster's gut. He pushed the deadweight of the corpse free of the blade with his shield as Trinne and Cousland moved up behind him. The three of them spread out to finish off the darkspawn that remained. Frida had already furthered that goal considerably; two of the archers lay with throats torn open by the time the Wardens reached them.

The remaining hurlock lit after Alistair, a mistake it didn't get much time to regret as the warrior wasted no time knocking it off its feet and slashing open its throat as well before it could regain its feet.

Trinne's attention was yanked off the warrior and back to her own fight when an arrow whistled by so close she felt the breeze on her cheek. *Right, trying to not get shot.* She unleashed another wave of telekinetic energy, the spell hitting the closest genlock with enough force to knock it off its feet. Lightning flared from her fingertips to finish one, Cousland and his daggers making short work of the other two. "Nice job," she commented.

The noble just shrugged--which she was beginning to think was his way of accepting compliments, or maybe just interacting with her--clearly distracted by the view over her shoulder.

Even as Trinne turned to see what was making him frown like that, a thin blur of metal flew past her
and across the gap between them and the remaining genlocks, barely visible in the dimly lit room. The throwing knife's blade dug deep into the shoulder of one of the genlocks attacking Alistair. The creature let out a noise somewhere between a growl and a screech, and abandoned its comrade, wheeling to charge the two of them. Her instinctive lightning bolt missed—missed—and Trinne found herself digging deep to fling a rocky projectile at the darkspawn, the contact bowling it over. It didn't get up.

"That's a new one," Alistair remarked as they regrouped and caught their breath, Cousland retrieving his throwing knife from the darkspawn corpse. "Haven't seen you use that spell before."

Trinne made a face. "Earth stuff is hard for me. Especially indoors, when there's less space to work with." And primal's more Jowan's thing anyway. The reminder hurt, and her voice was gruffer than usual as she urged, "Let's get moving..."

>>X<<

There were only a few genlocks in the second floor's last room, but most were archers, and Trinne found herself subconsciously making sure Alistair was between her and them. His shield looked like a pincushion by the time they were done.

The first of the rooms on the third floor made up for that low darkspawn count, though—eight or nine genlocks all at once. Fortunately—in her opinion, anyway—only a couple were archers. Trinne made sure to take them out first. By the time they'd killed all the darkspawn in the small room, Alistair was so out of breath he looked ready to fall over. They quickly decided to risk a longer rest this time. Not going to do us any good if the lone warrior in our group passes out from exhaustion before we're done, Trinne reminded the anxious part of her mind chanting Hurry hurry hurry on a loop. She leaned against the wall near the door as Cousland crouched to peek through the keyhole. Figures he wants to know what's waiting for us. Guess we don't really have anything better to do right now anyway...

>>X<<

"Can you see anything?"

"Not since you asked me ten seconds ago," Harvey muttered through clenched teeth, not bothering to hide his vexed tone from the mage. If this girl ever errs on the side of patience, it will be a sight to behold.

Crouched and facing the door he couldn't exactly see her face, but he could almost imagine Trinne rolling her eyes.

"You sound as if I'm disturbing you, Cousland. I'm just standing here."

And there it was, the token snarky remark. But Harvey had a remark on his own waiting on the tip of the tongue. You are not standing, you're hovering. I need focus as much as you do— you don't see me running around you in circles while you're trying to cast spells, do you?

Or at least that's what he would have said if he didn't manage to bury his inner abrasive thirteen year old.

"Just...give it a moment," he sighed in the end, dwindling patience audible in his voice.
The rogue was glad to feel the lingering presence back away. *Finally.* The mage gave it a rest, maybe realizing that indeed she was of no help here, imagine that.

Once again pressing his face to the door, hands making a small cave around the keyhole to shield it from the light of the nearest torch, he let his eye adjust to the gloom on the other side. This time familiar, ugly shapes crossed his field of vision.

"At least two," he counted.

"I really don't understand why they aren't hording on us by now." Alistair sat down heavily on the flour sack pile left near the wall. He wasn't wounded, thankfully, Harvey had no idea how they would have managed to go this far without the warrior literally battering their way through the spawn. A little bruised maybe, and tired like demons--like all of them were--the templar took advantage of the first longer stop they'd decided they could afford since entering the tower.

"What do you mean?" the girl inquired.

Alistair scratched his head, or at least that's how it sounded. "I don't know how to explain it well...A few Grey Wardens told me darkspawn share one big mind, sort of. What one monster sees, others know of as well. Not sure how far it carries though."

There was a pregnant pause when the mage digested that information. "Maybe with all the fighting going on outside, a few people inside the tower don't seem like a big deal to them?" she suggested.

Alistair let out a short laugh. "I'll drink to that."

*Agreed.* Harvey pushed the short exchange to the back of his mind, simultaneously trying to catch a glimpse of the horrors waiting for them on the other side of the door.

The chamber was shrouded in relative darkness, and the field of vision offered by the keyhole wasn't much either. Harvey prided himself in having decent imagination, one of the reasons he wasn't disappointed when his father decided to leave him behind in Highever. Wars were messy and unpleasant, that's what he thought.

Nothing prepared him for The Tower of Ishal. Nothing prepared the noble for piles of corpses, some of them mutilated beyond recognition, hung on stillages, for amusement, for the sole reason the creatures could do it, so they did.

And the smell...

Several moments of straining his eye passed without bringing any revelations. Something moved in the darkness, and he half expected a sickly grey iris to appear on the other side. Nothing of the sort happened. Before giving up, he pressed one of his ears to the little hole, not hoping for anything useful in particular.

A curious sound rose above the background murmurs and scraping of metal, so unexpected, Harvey thought he imagined it the first time around. But it appeared once again, and then once more.

The rogue weighed the possibility. *Well, from his experience every fortress ought to have one. And they hadn't stumbled onto it yet...*

Harvey actually smirked, like someone who was previously fumbling through a song, and suddenly
caught a rhythm.

He got up and faced his companions, his sudden change of mood apparent and drawing their attention.

"I think I can get us an ally or two," he told them.

He was met with skeptical glances. They hadn't encountered a living soul so far.

"Alright, maybe I can."

And then he explained.

>>X<<

Twenty seconds were all Harvey dared to ask for, as the door flew open and the four of them stormed the chamber.

*It's a kennel, I knew it was a kennel*—mabari cages, a familiar sight graced his eyes. But it also meant the plan was in motion, so he steeled himself accordingly. Twenty seconds—be it generous or stingy to assess the situation—it wasn't enough for their enemies to flank them, by his estimation, and he had to make the most of it.

Somewhere on his right Alistair's shield slapped a mace out of twisted claws, the monster yelping in pained surprise. A flash of lightning flew across the chamber, blinding and drawing attention of the rest of the darkspawn. And there was more than two of them, as suspected, one especially big and ugly.

He had no time to waste, and ran.

Cages. There were four cages, but three hounds. The animal in the third one wasn't moving - dead or incapacitated. Releasing even one of the remaining would be a great asset, and two would be ideal. As swiftly as he could, the rogue approached the first hatch, the nearest darkspawn not mesmerized by the mage's lightshow going after him with an ugly sword. In a heartbeat it got tackled by ever-zealous Frida—she proceeded to make a mess out of the monster's limbs and Harvey sidestepped the creature with ease.

Within seconds he was at the small door, the mabari inside growling and barking in complete frenzy, not at him, but at the rest of the darkspawn who ignored the rogue and went after the warrior and the mage. He risked a peek. Alistair was fending off three creatures by now, the girl standing right behind him, giving a taste of her spells to anyone who dared to come closer.

*Now, let's open this...* His eyes trailed over the opening mechanism, but found no lock or knob or anything looking vaguely familiar. *Well, that's certainly a setback,* the rogue thought, suddenly very warm in the face of settling panic. He tried the door, pulling at the metal bars with a certain dose of denial, but to no avail.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement further down the corridor, heard a clang of hinges and a half dozen of darkspawn joined the fray. They went for poor Alistair, completely ignoring the inconspicuous figure fiddling by the cages. Almost no time left. *Think Cousland, I'm pretty sure no one simply magicked these dogs inside.* He looked down—the construction was surprisingly sturdy, the lower parts of the cage entombed in the pavement. So was the strange opening mechanism—some
kind of dwarven invention maybe?

And these cobblestones did look a little different from the rest.

He turned around, eyes searching for a clue. And there it was, merely a few feet away—a lever, sticking out like a sore thumb. Almost impossible to overlook, if you knew what to look for.

Feeling fairly stupid, Harvey conquered three steps and pulled on it.

The next seconds could only have been called gruesome, jaws crushing windpipes to pieces and claws peeling skin off tainted bones. The freed hounds—all three of them—went after darkspawn with a vengeance, and a genuine one, as far as Harvey was concerned. This room was no different from the ones their little group left behind. The monsters made a mockery out of the fallen defenders, stripping and piling their corpses near the central pillars. The owners of these hounds were somewhere in there, most likely. Did the hounds have to watch them getting murdered, while they could do nothing?

The rogue knew at least three Fereldan proverbs concerning mabari and their loyalty.

Previously reaching for his daggers, Harvey reconsidered. Monsters were now falling like young trees in the presence of a crazy wood-cutter, and he felt like it wasn't his place to intervene—like the dogs earned the right to settle the score on their own. Even Alistair and Trinne backed off after a while, watching the flurry of teeth and claws, fascinated.

It didn't take long.

The last of the darkspawn hit the pavement, but the mabari weren't done, not by a long shot. They lunged ahead towards the corridors, howling their own battlesong—Frida trailing behind, clearly enjoying herself. The rogue almost called after her, but gave it up; three battle-trained hounds, full of pent up frustration and fury at their oppressors, they will hold up at least a few minutes without any help.

An approving pat on the back made him jump.

"You whole?" Trinne asked, sounding surprisingly cheery.

"Uh, yes." Harvey gathered himself after the unexpected gesture. "I'm afraid you guys got the worst of it this time." He hesitated. Why was she smiling?

"We'll live." The mage waved her hand dismissively. "Let's follow our new furry friends, shall we? They could need us. Oh, and our resident templar thinks we're almost at the top, so there's hope, eh?" she added.

Oh, so it was the sudden influx of four legged companions that brightened her mood—she was fond of the animals. Harvey had no heart to tell her it might not be as simple as that. No heart...and no possibility, since Trinne was no longer there, gone and chatting up Alistair in the amount of time it took him to blink.

Harvey shook his head. You're just angry she was right about the tower, admit it. And indeed he was, so he made a silent promise to apologize to her. Later. After all of this is over and he gets to see his brother again. He and the mage didn't see eye to eye, but she shouldn't have become a target of his vile mood.
And then Trinne said something which colored the blond templar scarlet, and caused a wave of giggling on her part.

Harvey rolled his eyes. That is if she stops making googly eyes in the middle of the battlefield. Maker.
Of Brave Men and Cowards

A trail of cooling darkspawn corpses led them right towards the stair room. They encountered no trouble on the way there--they halted only once, ready, when a sudden movement started in their direction--but at the last second Alistair put a gloved hand on Trinne's shoulder, and the companions made space for three mabari hurrying in the opposite way. As Harvey watched them disappear along the corridor's curve, he could swear he heard a small disappointed whine coming from the mage.

Upon entering the chamber they were welcomed by even more fallen darkspawn corpses--and one Frida, casually sitting amongst the gore, her stubby tail waving frantically as they approached. Yet again the rogue noticed Amell gravitating towards his hound, this time in an attempt to say hi, he assumed. The girl looked determined to ruffle the dog's fur, but by that point it was hard to find a spot not covered with sticky bile. She settled on a friendly pat on the head instead, which nonetheless ended in a quick inconspicuous wiping of hand on her robes.

"So your friends aren't staying with us?" she asked, disappointed.

_No, they are not_, Harvey thought, cautiously eyeing the door on the top of the staircase -- leading to what it seemed to be the final floor. Obviously, with their owners dead, the hounds had no obligation to stay and help with anything they might encounter...but it was still strange they left so soon. _Unless what awaited for them in the chamber above tipped the scales towards survival._

And knowing the ferocity of these dogs in a group, the thought sent shivers down his spine.

He glanced at his own mabari. Frida appeared neither tense nor anxious, completely absorbed with scratching an imaginary itch. Absentmindedly, he gave her a light push with his foot--to which she rolled over and asked for a belly rub. Harvey knew her well enough to know she often confused dangerous with exciting, not the kind measure you could--or should--rely on.

"Wait," he called after Alistair, who was already halfway up the stairs. "What's our plan for later?"

"Later?"

"When we handle what's upstairs and light the beacon. I'd rather not die here."

The mixed expression on the warrior's face told him he hadn't consider it yet.

_Preferably not assuming this was a suicide mission._

"Wait, we are getting out, aren't we?" the mage chimed in, finding the issue of utmost relevance.

Alistair shrank, visibly uncomfortable under their questioning gazes. He raised a hand in defense. "I guess we could try breaking through, if the lower floors are clear enough. Or if it's going to be impossible...we could always barricade ourselves in one of the rooms and wait for rescue there," he mused.

"WHAT?! You want us to stick here like rats in a cage?! Without food? Without water?" Trinne definitely wasn't thrilled with the second option.

"No, I meant...it's just a proposition," the templar gave in.

Harvey would admittedly like the option better if they took the time to barricade the lower floors first. He didn't argue though.
"We might not have a choice," he agreed reluctantly.

Trinne scoffed. "You both got hit on the head, I'm not staying here."

She defiantly conquered the rest of the stairs, not looking back. Both men shared a glance. Harvey shrugged.

Maybe she was onto something, the sooner they got this over with, the sooner they got to think about leaving.

They followed.

>>X<<

The sight stopped them dead in their tracks as effectively as any physical wall would. Hunched in the shadows under the dome was the largest creature Harvey has ever seen--gray-skinned and horned and terrible--and something that used to be indisputably human was making sickening sounds between its sharp teeth.

"An ogre," Alistair sighed in disbelief, and the rogue figured for all of the time spent in the Grey Wardens, it had to be the first time he'd encountered one as well.

The world froze as the two parties assessed each other, a moment during which Harvey was overwhelmed by a sudden regret he had no way of joining the runaway hounds.

It lasted a second or a thousand years, but finally a thought moved behind the small bloodshot eyes and the world resumed its course. The monster tossed the half-eaten corpse aside--a child bored with their toy--and everything else was drowned by a deafening roar.

The hulk charged. Harvey didn't wait to get trampled and ducked to the side, daring to look back only when he was sure he wasn't the creature's target.

*This has to be some kind of a sick joke.*

How were they supposed to fight a monster larger than a draft horse? The clawed hand itself could crush a man or tear him in half.

Alistair, who turned out to be the unfortunate focus of the Ogre's attack seemed to come to a similar conclusion, because after avoiding the initial charge he was doing what he could to keep those at distance.

Harvey stared, hypnotized by the strange dance. The giant appendages didn't turn out to be as fast as the noble expected.

*They are too big,* he realized--the sheer mass was making it difficult for the beast to adjust its movement. A giant arm swung towards the templar once, then twice; trying to hit, to grapple, with no avail. The warrior was too careful, hiding behind his shield, making himself a smaller target.

Third time around the limb faltered when Frida jumped to reach it with her teeth. Making use of the distraction, the warrior's blade left a gash on the monstrous forearm. Then he fell back, waiting for another occasion.

And seeing how Frida was keeping the monster busy, one that might arise soon.

They were first to draw blood, Harvey cheered silently...and sobered up instantly because the monster continued its pursuit, not fazed at all. How many gashes like that one they had to deal before
it felt anything? Alistair was surprisingly agile and lucky so far, but the truth was...

The truth was, the overall situation looked pitiful at best, the warrior constantly backing away. Harvey's hound was but an annoying fly and it was only a matter of time before she got swatted away.

A bright lightning flew across the chamber to dance on the Ogre's back, electric currents jumping between muscle groups for a few moments before dying out, leaving behind a patch of charred skin. The monster reached towards the aching spot, but otherwise didn't divide its attention, determined to squash the bug stinging its fingers.

"Cousland, don't stand there like a stuffed dummy, help him!" the girl berated loudly--a vocal equivalent of a slap in the face--and Harvey realized he was just standing there, watching, and that his behavior had long since passed the assessing the situation point and became something quite shameful.

He glanced at the mage--somehow she managed to look furious and scared at the same time.

But not scared enough not to fight.

Move you damn coward, Harv chastened himself. His hands reached for the daggers on his back, but confronted with the perspective of approaching the monster, wandered towards the safer belt instead. Five knives were all that was left of the set he'd bought earlier--the rogue clutched two of the blades, and without any better ideas, flung them at the creature's head.

The target was huge, but constantly moving, and the daggers missed, one rebounding from the curved horn and harmlessly disappearing somewhere amongst the debris, one managing to penetrate the creature's shoulder.

Not that it noticed.

I would have to make a pincushion out of it before it'd notice.

"You're standing in the way of the spell, move!" he heard a sudden warning.

Trinne stood engulfed in a sickly glow, distorting the world around her. It was the most impressive lightshow Harvey yet seen the mage handle--more magic or whatever she used to cast her spells. It looked...dangerous, and not easy to control, so he obediently saw himself out of the trajectory.

The spell seemed powerful... who knew, maybe it would win them this one.

The energy flew past, close enough to cause goose bumps on his arms. Freed from the strain Trinne wobbled a bit, tired, and looking smaller than he remembered...but also undeniably pleased. To his disbelief the Ogre slowed down and actually stopped, as if confused.

The opportunity arose and Alistair's sword again cut along the monstrous forearm. A current of dark blood stained the wooden shield and two sausage-like fingers flew in the air.

Pain woke the monster up, before ex-templar could follow up any further. The rogue only just begun wondering why the creature was crouching when the horned head rammed straight into Alistair. There was an audible crack -- shield, bone? And the warrior's body found itself on the other side of the chamber, motionless.

He wasn't getting up.
Not distracted by the sword anymore, the Ogre took care of Frida next; a wide, clawed swing flinging her towards the wall. Harvey wanted to shout, but somehow he couldn't find his voice. The monster laughed, a low, guttural sound that sent shivers down noble's spine. It turned to Alistair to finish the job.

"Leave him alone, you big, ugly..." The lightning that hit Ogre's head was noticeably weaker than before, as if the last spell had completely worn the girl out. Which was probably true, Harvey realized. But by some kind of cosmic joke, it was enough to draw the monster's attention.

It turned to them. It looked...amused almost, if it was even capable of such an emotion.

So much fun this evening, it had.

_I need to do something, anything to slow it down. Or we will die here._

The creature was huge, but maybe he could use that to his advantage. Daggers in both hands, Harvey grit his teeth and threw himself into collision course, fighting his weak knees, doing the best he could to ignore the hulk's mass and the impetus that could easily leave him an unrecognizable stain on the ground. _I should have done it earlier, when it was fighting Alistair. When it wouldn't see me coming--an unwelcome thought taunted._

Not slowing down, Harvey found himself between tree trunk legs, aiming to repeat the move he used in the Korcari Wilds; going for the knees.

The thing's grasp around his pelvis knocked the air out of his lungs--both daggers slipped out, sliding on the cold pavement. _But... it's slower than I am_, he disagreed faintly. And yet the creature only tightened its grip.

The world turned upside down, and with sudden terrible clarity Harvey realized they were all dead, doomed the moment they entered the tower. They just didn't know it then. Him and Frida, and Alistair...

...and Trinne, who was screaming profanities, waving her staff, faint shreds of lightning dancing towards the Ogre, mostly ignored. Head hanging down, he found her eyes and she apologized wordlessly, because she could do nothing.

She was wasting her efforts, he realized. This is not what they came here to do.

_Cousland always does his duty, eh Father? Maybe I'll be useful to someone after all._

"Light the beacon," he rasped.

The mage paused, breathing heavily. Her lips moved as she mouthed the sentence back at him, trying to make sense of his words... She nodded, eyes wide in sudden understanding and was gone, scrambling towards the hearth on the other side. Towards their true goal.

_Good._ A familiar shape moved out of the corner of his eye and he came to a decision. It might have been all the blood rushing to his head, but he defiantly wondered if he could give Amell a head start. Her and the warrior, if he was still alive.

"FRIDA!" His hands reached for the satchel bumping against his stomach, in need of the finds he'd tucked there while in the courtyard. _How potent was it?_ he wondered then. In half breath the hound was there, mid-air, aiming for the arm that was keeping him captive. The creature didn't let go, but
that wasn't the objective. The instinctively retracted limb changed its angle, in a way that let Harvey see the monster's ugly face. *I guess it's time to find out.*

He was never more proud of a perfect hit. The small vial with acid broke right between the red, swinish eyes.

Harvey suddenly felt glad, mage's earlier words echoing in his head. *And now let me go, you big, ugly...* Howls of pain drowned out the rest of the thought.

The monster tightened its grasp and smashed him against one of the stone supports like a rag doll.

>>X<<

Alistair woke up to the pounding of his head accompanied by the always-lovely need to throw up. Still dazed, he instinctively reached towards his shield—even though it lay in two pieces—only to find out it was a mistake. The sharp pain that blossomed as he tried to straighten in his left arm woke him up completely, the other hand reaching out to nurse the aching limb.

The chamber was...*brighter*, than he remembered?

And the scene before him made him wonder how long was he out. At the first glance the Ogre was fending off Cousland's mabari...but it was doing it clumsily, missing by a long shot, and stumbling on pieces of ancient walls strewn around...as if it couldn't...

...see them?

And then it struck Alistair the chamber was brighter because the beacon was lit, the flames sharing their glow through the stained glass windows. *Silly thought, someone should tell the monster that it lost the battle. Such a sore loser.*

*And where is Trinne?* he wondered, a moment before he spotted her. She was trying to drag their companion's limp body as far away from the tussling Ogre as possible, the debris not making her job any easier.

*Damn.* But he'd have to worry about that later.

The monster's head turned, enough for the ex-templar to notice the disgusting mess where its eyes used to be. It indeed got blinded somehow, Trinne's work maybe? Cousland's? He wouldn't get a better chance, not while the hulk thought it was fighting only one enemy. Sword in hand, knowing better than to run—*you don't look a gift horse in the mouth, after all*—the warrior walked closer, as silently as his armor let him, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

At this point the Ogre went almost berserk from the pain, trying to catch the tenacious mabari, the hound not sparing any occasion to bite or tear the flesh, set on her own path of vengeance. And then finally creature made a mistake, desperate, trying to ram into her in the move that knocked Alistair out of the battle. It missed the hound.

Didn't miss the wall though.

The giant body hit the ground, causing a small tremor. Alistair was there in a heartbeat, blade ready, swallowing the battle cry because chances like that one didn't grow on trees. He would not mess this up.

The sharp blade slid surprisingly easy between the monster's ribs, reaching its heart. The hulk tensed
in agony, then deflated.

And it was over.

Alistair spent a moment cleaning his sword with the Ogre's loincloth, ignoring his shaking hands. They did it... they somehow did it. Although... the feeling of relief quickly dissipated when he though about the cost. Hiding the blade he approached the mage, who was currently crouched over Cousland's limp body. From the sight of it, his state wasn't good.

"Can you do anything for him?"

Tiny hands vaguely glided across the rogue's chest, as if searching for some kind of anchor point--as he imagined, not for the first time. For the briefest of moments Alistair was stricken by a familiar impression, she reminded him of young trainee templars, drilled by clerics for their knowledge of the holy hymns, finding out they accidentally learned to recite the wrong one.

When Trinne's hands balled into fists, he knew she gave up.

"I'm...not sure," she admitted. "His chest is a mess, ribs punctured his lungs in I don't know how many places. They're filling with blood." The last part the mage spat out with a reproach almost. "I could try healing the wounds, but I don't know how to move the bones. Redirect the blood. I don't know how to stop him from drowning!"

You'll need to learn how to make tough decisions, Duncan's words echoed in his mind. Alistair believed him of course, as much as he believed the implied 'someday' wouldn't come until very much later. He was a junior Warden on a routine mission, for Andraste's sake. As far as tasks go, this was supposed to be a more dignified equivalent of cleaning the latrines.

He silently thanked the Maker for being merciful enough to keep the laying man unconscious and unaware of his own pending death. The short, strained breaths were the only indicators that the rogue was still fighting.

The templar hated himself for what he was about to do, even if it was the right decision. His left arm felt stiff and painful--surely broken. He was unable to carry a broken shield not to mention anything...heavier. He swallowed hard.

"We can't stay here," he addressed the mage, who at this point seemed on the verge of breaking down.

She absentmindedly wiped off the trickle of blood staining Cousland's lips. She didn't answer.

"Duncan asked me to look after the new recruits, and I can't do anything for him at this point. But if something were to happen to you as well--the Commander would skin me alive." The joke was completely uncalled for, but he needed something--anything--for the girl to shake off the shock and start thinking clearly. He possibly reached his goal, because she eyed him with an intent to either slap or inflict other bodily harm.

"Look, I don't love Cousland, but nobody deserves to be left behind, we hafta at least try an' carry him," she protested.

"Only if you're able to fix a broken arm," Alistair pointed at the useless limb. He couldn't straighten it, even if he tried.

Trinne got up, angrily--the limb glowed when she estimated the damage. He let her do it, even if they
both already knew her answer.

"I can't," she admitted bitterly.

"Then we have to go," gently, but the warrior pressed on. The beacon on the top of the tower was lit, performing its function. They'd managed to complete the mission, delay or not. Now everything depended on Teyrn Loghain and his troops.

"In death, sacrifice," he mouthed, hand searching for comfort in the Warden's Oath hanging around his neck. They glanced for the last time in the direction of progressively paler man. Cousland's mabari rested at his side, waiting for her master to stop playing.

"Frida, Frida come on!" The girl called out, but the hound didn't budge.

Great, we aren't losing one companion, we're losing two. The mage seemed eager to try again, so the ex-templar prodded her less gently this time, tugging her hand in the direction of the exit. He couldn't carry a dog either.

"She's not coming, that's just the way mabari are."

>>X<<

They never made it to the door. The guilt didn't even manage to settle its heavy burden on Alistair's shoulders. Like blood from an open wound, darkspawn poured into the chamber. The girl shouted out a warning, but everything drowned in cacophony of inhuman laughter and a rain of arrows. Before he lost consciousness, the warrior's mind suggested the hum of giant wings.

Peculiar last thing to hear before death, he thought.
One Good Thing

Hazy faces caught by a current came and went almost like water, fluid, intermingling with one another -- they spoke to him but their words were merely a hum in his ears. Memories were places, as real and tangible as shadows. He was sitting beside his father, watching him settle a dispute between two peasants. He was sneaking out of the castle, right under his mother's nose. He was on the top of the tower, and a giant paw squeezed, and squeezed and he felt like he couldn't breathe anymore and...

Harvey woke with a start, the nightmare finally pushing him over the edge -- leaving behind a cold sweat and a dreadful feeling he was done for. The visions scattered instantly, all except the last one, that terrifying beast. The monster's grasp still lingered, a memory more than a dream; he felt it even as he laid in bed...

...covered with a wooly blanket?

He blinked. It caught him off guard, that bed. There should be an ogre here, and blood and the pain he was preparing himself for--instead, the rouge's eyes trailed the wooden logs disappearing in the shadows of the ceiling above. The mundane sight didn't match his expectations, so he just lay there for a while, disoriented and trying to make sense of any of it.

The warm dimness of the room certainly wasn't the monster-infested darkness of the Tower of Ishal, even the sounds didn't match up.

Listening closer, his mind was trying to figure out if some kind of hellish realm that came after death could mock him with what seemed to be kitchen noises. Loose strands of hay tucked between the sheets were itching his legs--it seemed too banal to actually be real.

Yet another quiet clang finally urged him into a sitting position. His body seemed a bit stiff as he rose, but otherwise unharmed, and that didn't feel right either. Not that he was being ungrateful...it was all simply too strange. Did he get patched up after the battle, and did it mean they'd won? He looked around in search for clues--there were no huts in Ostagar, and the interior was completely alien, yet the young woman bustling about the cauldron was a somewhat familiar sight. Golden eyes judged him with a certain dose of...curiosity?

"Ah, your eyes finally open."

Her name escaped him -- it was either Morgana-something, or Morrinh? The woman whose mother calls herself the stuff of legends.

"You..." he croaked before his throat gave out, launching him into a coughing fit. How long was I out? Surprisingly, the apostate took it as a cue to offer him a small bowl of water. He drank greedily after hesitating for the briefest of moments--if she wanted to drug him, she'd had plenty of chances by now. The clear fluid had a strange, herbal--but not unpleasant--aftertaste.

"Am I your guest?" he managed. This had to be her hut, they weren't invited inside before, but he had no ideas as to what other place it could possibly be.

"Good, Mother shall be pleased to know your mind is intact," the black-haired woman pondered the blank stare he gave her. "Or at least some of it is."

Back in the Wilds, then. Harvey completely ignored the implied jeer and rubbed his face, trying to get
rid of remaining cobwebs. His final memories from the tower didn't explain the mysterious change of locations. There was at least several hours between Ostagar and this place, how did that even... "You saved me? Us?" Please say us.

She cocked an eyebrow. "T'was not I. You were injured, and then Mother rescued you and your friends. Do you not remember?"

I remember I should have been dead. Myriads of questions raced through his head, ranging from "how" to "why", but one of them seemed much more relevant than all the rest. He was fine, and his companions as well, somehow. But was his brother fine?

"Darkspawn... what happened to the battle?"

She didn't respond at once and that couldn't be a good sign. "The man who was supposed to respond your signal quit the field--the darkspawn won your battle. Those he abandoned were massacred. Your friend...he's not taking it well--the Circle girl is trying to coddle him back to high spirits, but without success," the witch mentioned. She didn't seem very moved by the fact.

He didn't catch it, he didn't catch anything after she told him the battle was lost. The room was spinning. Fergus, where the Fade are you?

"Any survivors?" he managed, fighting a wave of nausea.

The woman titled her head. "Apart from you? Only stragglers that are long gone. You would not want to see what's happening in that valley now."

He didn't care about visions of carnage at the moment, he was silently weighing the odds. If Fergus had made it to the battle, he would have never taken the coward's route, that simply wasn't his brother. There was always a chance he was still stuck deep in the Wilds -- but that meant an area progressively flooded by waves upon waves of darkspawn.

Clutching the blanket, tighter and tighter, the rogue didn't notice his knuckles becoming as white as bone. He just felt he had no strength left. For any of this.

The witch apparently had taken the prolonged silence as the end of their conversation. "Your companions considered leaving without you; I'd dress myself and show them you are alive and walking. If I were you, that is."

They were..."How long was I out?"

"For a whole day, even though Mother had long since healed your wounds. She believed you might not wake up at all. It happens sometimes," she added upon seeing his lost expression. "The flesh is whole and waiting, yet the mind wanders about."

She was talking magic and he didn't follow. He made no effort to, though. Mumbling "I need to get out of here" under his breath, directed at the old trunk sitting beside the bed, he salvaged what he could out of his clothes and got dressed, nodding at the few more things the woman was telling him, but not catching much of it.

He spent twenty agonizing seconds looking for his main twin daggers, only to realize they were still in the Tower of Ishal, laying among the debris. He was left with three throwing knives attached to the belt.
He wasn't even remotely satisfied with this, but it had to do. He looked at the apostate again, straightened up and nodded curtly. He gave her one distracted 'thank you', the young woman's name still escaping his memory--but he had no time to worry if it sounded sincere, in his mind he was wondering if his companions would be prone to venturing deeper into Korcari Wilds, in search for one Fergus Cousland.

He really doubted that.

>>X<<

This was not going well at all.

"Come on, Alistair, it's not all bad." Just like her previous fifteen attempts--which felt like fifteen dozen--Trinne's cajoling evoked exactly no response from the blond warrior. He just continued staring moodily out into the surrounding swamp. So she kept trying. "Pretty terrible, sure, but we're alive, Frida's alive..." She self-consciously pulled her cloak tighter as she glanced down at the mabari laying by her feet. The bright side to Alistair's moodiness was that he hadn't yet noticed the mage was wearing different robes underneath the borrowed cloak. The longer she could keep it that way, the happier she'd be. Still, she wished he'd say something; cheer up just a little. "Morrigan's mother even seems pretty sure Cousland's gonna make it." Which is some kind of damn miracle...

As if to underscore her words, the door to the hut creaked open and the rogue emerged, rolling one shoulder to banish residual stiffness and looking both distracted and just as morose as the warrior standing next to her--which is his case was pretty much his normal expression.

"See? He's fine." She gestured toward the noble as Frida lumbered to her feet and ran to her master, nearly knocking him over with the enthusiasm of her greeting. "Welcome back to the land of the living," Trinne muttered, more than a little surprised at just how relieved she was by that fact.

Alistair finally turned from his thousand-yard stare, and she could see just how tenuous were the threads keeping the warrior from completely falling apart as he sized up their fellow Warden. "You... I... We thought you were dead for sure."

It was just a bit surreal, she had to admit. Like seeing a ghost. Punctured lung, broken pretty much everything, drowning in his own blood, I'm not good enough...

"I'm fine," Cousland mumbled, still clearly preoccupied, as he scratched his dog's ears. "I appreciate your concern-" his eyes darted to her, and Trinne fought the urge to wave him off- "both of you."

"Ahhh, this doesn't even seem real," Alistair groaned. "Duncan's dead... the king... And if it wasn't for Morrigan's mother, we'd be dead on top of that tower..."

...Just like them, Trinne finished mentally, knowing he was thinking it, too.

"Do not speak about me as if I am not present, lad," the old woman scolded. "I have ears."

And a habit of standing so bloody still and being so quiet it's easy to forget you're there, the mage thought to herself, rolling her shoulders to get the damned new robes to sit right. The fur itched.

"I didn't mean..." Alistair fumbled, turning scarlet. "That is, you never told us your name. Wh-What do we call you?"
"Names are pretty but useless," she waved him off dismissively. "The Chasind folk call me Flemeth. I suppose that will do."

"Flem- The Flemeth? From the legends?" Now both of them were gawking, Trinne was pretty sure, memories of a certain thief vivid in her mind. "Daveth was right," Alistair breathed, "You're the Witch of the Wilds, aren't you?"

"And so what if I am?" Flemeth returned. "I know a bit of magic, and it has served you well, has it not?" She had a point, and the meaningful glances she let rest on each of them said she knew it.

"Why did you save us anyway?" Cousland asked.

The old witch chuckled. "We cannot have all the Grey Wardens dying at once, can we? Someone has to deal with these darkspawn. And it has always been the Grey Wardens' duty to unite the land against the Blight. Or did that change when I wasn't looking?"

"Of course not!" Alistair protested sharply. "We were fighting the darkspawn; the king had nearly defeated them! Why would Loghain do this?!" he demanded in frustration, gesturing angrily.

"Now that is a good question," Flemeth nodded, pursing her lips. "Men's hearts hold shadows darker than any tainted creature. Perhaps he believe the Blight to be an enemy he can outmaneuver. He does not see that the evil behind it is the true threat."

"Well, we can't do anything about him with just the three of us," Frida lightly headbutted the back of her knees. "Four of us," Trinne corrected, wobbling slightly at the bump and fighting a small grin as she crossed her arms. "Besides, the Blight needs to be our focus."

"Arl Eamon would never stand for what he did," Alistair muttered. "And since he wasn't at Ostagar, he still has most of his men, so he could help with facing the Blight as well." His voice rose in volume as he warmed to the idea. "Of course! We could go to him for help!"

"And there's gotta be other people who would help, right?!" Trinne added. "I mean, it's, like, the end of the bloody world. The Wardens have allies for that, don't they-We?"

"Of course!" the warrior exclaimed, fumbling in his pack. "The treaties!" They were slightly crinkled when he pulled them free, but otherwise fine. "We have treaties with the dwarves, the Dalish, mages... they're obligated to help us during a Blight!"

"Well, that certainly sounds like an army to me," Flemeth pointed out, smirking.

"So can... can we do this?" Alistair was looking at her, Trinne realized, genuinely unsure if they could manage and desperately not wanting to be in charge. "Go to Redcliffe, the Circle... these other places, and build an army?"

_The Circle will be less than fun, but it's not like I have a choice... "Why not?" she shrugged, glancing at Cousland. "It's what Grey Wardens do. 'Sides, sounds like it'll be an adventure." Always wanted t' go on one of those... Of course, this adventure was missing something if it was going to match her daydreams. Someone. Nope, not going there._

Flemeth looked bemused as she crossed her arms. "So... you are set then? Ready to be Grey Wardens?"
"Yep," Trinne replied, honestly sort of excited about this. She remembered her manners just in the nick of time. "Thank you for everything, Flemeth."

"Oh, no, no, thank you," the old woman chuckled. "You are the Grey Wardens here, not I. You will be doing all of the work. However..." her eyes twinkled almost mischievously, "there is yet one thing I can offer you."

Trinne and Alistair swiveled to follow the Witch's gaze.

"The stew is bubbling, Mother dear," Morrigan announced as she joined them. "Shall we have three guests for the eve, or none?"

"The Grey Wardens are leaving shortly, girl." Flemeth smirked in amusement as she added, "And you will be joining them."

It was very difficult to suppress an amused chuckle of her own as Trinne watched the expressions on both Morrigan and Alistair's faces.

"Such a shame-What?!"

"But we already have a mage!" Alistair was looking straight at her as he protested, his eyes adding, *At least I know you're not a witch.*

"She can guide you out of the Wilds, boy," Flemeth countered. "Or do you think you know the paths well enough?"

He muttered something under his breath but subsided.

"I, for one, would be happy to have you along," Trinne promised.

"Have I no say in this, Mother?" Morrigan demanded, looking decidedly unhappy. "This is not what I wanted, I am not ready-"

"They need you, Morrigan," Flemeth cut her off. "They need you to make it out of the Wilds, and they need you to complete their goal."

A meaningful glance passed between mother and daughter, and Morrigan sighed. "Very well. Allow me to get my things, if you please."

Trinne nodded, and the witch vanished back inside the hut. She was only half paying attention as she promised Flemeth they would take care of her daughter, too busy feeling gleeful about the prospect of having another mage--not to mention another *woman*--along.

>>X<<

It wasn't too long before Morrigan rejoined them, and after she and Flemeth traded farewells, the golden-eyed mage suggested they make for the village of Lothering. Trinne vaguely remembered seeing it on a map, not terribly far north of Ostagar. Given the piecemeal state of their gear--Cousland didn't have his daggers, Alistair's shield was lost, and she desperately wanted to replace these robes--the sooner they could resupply, the better.

Her sense of urgency in accomplishing that goal was doubled when she tripped on a tree root as they
neared the road and her arms flew out in an instinctive attempt to keep her balance.

Alistair, ever the gentleman even when grieving, caught one arm to steady her. "You alrig-" He broke off with an embarrassed cough and flushed bright red as he wrenched his gaze in the exact opposite direction of her--more specifically, of her new attire. "Maker's breath, what happened to your old robes?!

"Damaged beyond repair, apparently," Trinne replied dryly, crimson tinging her cheeks. Damn it all, this is exactly what I was afraid of, she grumbled to herself as she yanked the cloak back together over the Chasind robes. "And this was all Morrigan had to offer. I'm fine, to answer your question," she assured him, tugging in vain at the plunging neckline of the robes, even though they were no longer visible. "Though now you know why I'm in such a bloody hurry to resupply."

"...I guess so," Alistair chuckled sheepishly, and they shared embarrassed grins.

Trinne found herself wondering how she'd thawed so quickly toward the former templar. Watching Cousland almost-die and then nearly getting killed themselves probably had something to do with it, she reflected. The warrior's comment from their first meeting echoed in her mind--"One good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together"--and she smirked to herself even as Morrigan called a warning from up ahead.

Trinne's gaze snapped to the road, grip tightening on her staff in anticipation of a fight. But the mabari barreling towards them didn't look feral or murderous; he looked thrilled. The grey beast skidded to a halt in front of the Circle mage, tongue lolling, stubby tail wriggling the entirely of his hindquarters he was so happy to see her.

Trinne crouched so they were eye to eye. "Hey, boy." She barely had time to register that he looked familiar before both he and Cousland's mabari were growling at something else coming down the path.

She sighed as she straightened, watching Alistair draw his sword and Cousland reach for his remaining throwing knives. The mabari may have been friendly, but the darkspawn following him sure weren't.

"This is not going to be pretty," Trinne muttered, lightning gathering in her palm as they charged forward to meet the creatures head-on.
By the time the first lightning bolt flew from Trinne's fingers, Alistair had already gutted a hurlock, stripping the creature's hide-bound shield from its arm as it fell. She adjusted her aim slightly, the spell slamming into the next closest darkspawn. As the hurlock spasmed, the grey mabari tackled it and tore out its throat.

"Watch out!" Morrigan's warning cry rang out at the same moment she coated the charging alpha's armor with ice.

Alistair moved to intercept the more heavily armored foe, and the others shifted to crowd control. As a wave of her hand sent the small knot of darkspawn stumbling clumsily, Trinne glanced over at Cousland. She could tell he was waiting for shots that were clear enough to actually be worth taking before using the throwing knives clenched in his hands. Given that the two were all he had left, she couldn't really blame him, but his caution wasn't improving their odds.

Morrigan unleashed another spell, the air around one of the hurlocks warping slightly as it abruptly cowered in fear. Trinne flung a stonefist at the alpha, causing it to stumble. This gave Alistair an opening to exploit and Cousland a clear shot at the cowering darkspawn. Both of them took the available opportunities. The Circle mage had to admit a brief flash of grudging respect when the throwing knife buried itself in the hurlock's neck and the creature went down with a choked gurgle, clawing futilely at its throat. Alistair decapitated the alpha in the same moment, and she saw him look admiringly at the blade as he turned to deal with the next threat.

Only there wasn't one. The mabari had teamed up to drag down one of the remaining hurlocks, teeth and claws ripping at the monster's flesh, and the other one didn't stand a chance against simultaneous spells from both mages. As they caught their breath--and Cousland retrieved his throwing knife--Trinne crouched next to the grey mabari, eyeing him more critically this time.

"Those darkspawn didn't hurt you, did they, boy?" she crooned, tugging at her cloak as the furry beast wuffed and wagged his tail. "Wait a minute..." Traces of red and black kaddis still clung to the dog's fur, very much like... "I think this is the mabari I helped back at Ostagar," she murmured, scratching under his jaw.

Alistair nodded thoughtfully as he joined her. "He was probably looking for you. Mabari are like that. He knows you helped him, and he's... chosen you. As his new master."

Sweet! She couldn't help grinning. "Is that it, handsome boy? You wanna stay with me?"

Tail wagging, the mabari let out an enthusiastic bark.

Trinne glanced at Cousland's mabari, then back at her new one. "And you two'll play nice?"

"Alright, then. Welcome aboar ooof," Trinne laughed as her dog knocked her over and joyously licked her face.

Morrigan sighed. "So now we shall have this mangy beast following us about? Wonderful..."

"He's not mangy!" Alistair and Trinne protested in unison, the mage pressing her hands over the mabari's ears to block the witch's grumblings.
"Don't listen to mean old Morrigan," she crooned. "You're my handsome boy, yes, you are. You just need a bath..."

"We do need to get moving," Alistair prodded, offering her a hand up--while being very careful not to actually look at her as he hauled her to her feet, which only reinforced her haste to get new clothes. "What're you going to name him?"

Trinne looked down at new dog, wishful past conversations about pet names running through her head. "Hmm..." She giggled, "Dane, I think." The inside joke behind the name was too bloody good to pass up, especially for her. And he certainly seemed to like it.

Plus one furry, four-legged member, the group continued on toward Lothering.

>>X<<

Of course it couldn't be easy.

Of course they couldn't just waltz into the village, buy what they needed, and get on with this saving the world thing.

Of course the road was blocked by a gang of highwaymen, who were either cocky enough or stupid enough to think they stood a chance against the group before them. Thanks to pretty much even odds, numbers-wise, it was not a long fight. Alistair and Cousland took a few minutes to salvage anything they could use or trade from the bodies, the warrior even examining the corpse of a knight that lay nearby--probably a victim of the highwaymen.

"Here, Trinne, look at this." He handed her the locket the knight had been wearing, as well as a crumpled note.

The mage skimmed the messy handwriting. "We can try to find this friend of his, if we have time. But buying supplies comes first."

I need new robes, I seriously feel naked in these things.....

"And then what?" The former templar rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Not that I'm... questioning your leadership or anything, but what happens after we have supplies? What's your plan?"

She shrugged. "Getting the treaties fulfilled. Beyond that, like, for the how, I'll figure it out as I go."

"I need to find my brother." It was the first thing Cousland had said since leaving the Wilds, and it took everything in her to not make a sarcastic "He speaks!" comment as all three of them eyed the noble.

"That's a bad idea, Cousland," she said bluntly, crossing her arms.

"I have to agree," Alistair added reluctantly. "Your brother was scouting in the Wilds, wasn't he?"

"Then attempting to look for him there would be foolish," Morrigan scoffed, not even waiting for the rogue's nod of confirmation. "He is either dead or he managed to flee to the north."

"Very sensitive," Alistair drawled, raising an eyebrow at the witch.

She was unfazed by his censure. "I am simply saying it is foolish to mount a rescue when you have no idea where this man is and the Wilds are overrun with darkspawn. You will either find him
somewhere outside the Wilds with other survivors... or not at all."

"That doesn't mean I shouldn't at least look for him!" Cousland protested, one hand resting on Frida's head as she nudged his leg, the other curling into a fist.

"'Tis exactly what it means," Morrigan returned coolly. "You wish to do this brother of yours a service? Avenge him, and search for survivors later."

"She... has a point," Alistair concurred slowly, as if reluctant to agree with the witch. Trinne was silent, biting her lip as an uncomfortably pointed thought wormed its way into her brain.

_If that was Jowan out there, wouldn't you fight tooth and nail to save him?_

No. Jerk could get eaten by darkspawn for all I care.

You don't really mean that, Trinne Amell. You'd still die for him and you know it.

Maybe, but it felt damn good to vent.

She jerked out of her mental debate when she noticed the others were all staring at her. "She really is right. We're not gonna find him in the Wilds. Not alive, at least. And besides, isn't saving the whole country a bit more important than just one person that we don't even know we can find?"

"...Fine," the rogue muttered sourly, yanking his hood up so it shadowed his face. Trinne rolled her eyes. _Sulk like a baby for all I care._ "Let's go."

They headed down into the village, Frida and Dane racing ahead. Trinne giggled as her mabari tripped over his paws, tumbled headlong, and then resumed charging after Frida as if nothing had happened.

"He's such a goof," she muttered gleefully. An adorable, lumbering goof who could tear open the throat of anyone who threatened them. She smirked at the thought as she scanned for a merchant. As far as the eye could see outside the village, tents formed uneven rows, ramshackle and temporary dwellings for those already displaced by the Blight. _These are the people we're going to help._ Gaunt women, lips pressed in a thin frightened line. Children constantly looking over their shoulders to find their parents, make sure they were still there. Men with hollow, haunted eyes that spoke of losses she didn't even want to guess at. _We're doing this for them._ The thought sobered her as they passed the templar guard pacing back and forth at the entrance to the main village proper.

A commotion over near what she guessed was the chantry--biggest building in the place--caught her eye; a man in commoner's clothing and a woman in the pink robes of a priest both gesturing with equal fervor at the cart behind the man.

_Merchant?_ Trinne thought hopefully, bee lining toward the arguing pair, heedless of what she was getting herself into.

"...I can charge however bloody much I wish!" the man growled as their group drew closer. "My goods, my prices. If ya don't like it, take it to the Void."

"You vile man!" the priest spat, "You reap profit from their misfortune! I should have the templars give away everything in your cart!"

"You wouldn't dare!" The merchant stepped defensively in front of his goods. "Any of you lot step
too close and I'll-

"It's so nice to see everyone working together in a crisis!" Alistair piped up, pitching his voice loud enough to draw the attention of the two of them. "Warms the heart."

The merchant gave them a once over, smirking in satisfaction at the knowledge at least one of this group was armed. "You lot look able. Care to make a small profit helping out a beleaguered business man?"

"Why would we do that?" Trinne demanded, tugging her cloak a bit closer around her. It felt like he was staring right through it.

"Didn't you hear me mention profit?" he grinned.

"And now you try to bribe these others with your ill-gotten gains?!" The priest was fuming as she glanced at them. "He charges outlandish prices for things these people desperately need. Their suffering is lining his pockets!"

Morrigan, at least, was unmoved by the woman's passion. "'Tis only survival of the fittest. Every one of them would do the same in his shoes, were they given the chance."

"I only have so many supplies, Sister," the merchant spoke up, tone cold. "The people decide what those supplies are worth to them."

"After buying the vast majority of your wares from these very people last week, now--as they flee for their lives--you want to talk business?!!"

"Talk? Bah, I'm done talking." He waved a hand in angry dismissal. "You, soldier boy, I've a hundred silvers for you and your friends if you drive this rabble off, starting with her." He nodded at the priest. "Otherwise, I'm leaving."

No, no, no, don't leave! Trinne begged mentally. I need clothes.

"Don't you think you could lower your prices just a little?" she blurted, almost before she realized she was speaking.

"How much good d'ya think it would do 'em if they could buy nothin'?" the merchant demanded, crossing his arms.

"So you're sayin' compromise is completely impossible?" Trinne mirrored his posture, careful to keep her cloak covering the robes. "Isn't some profit better than none?"

"Fine, fine," he grunted in disgust. "As long as I'm allowed to charge something."

"Do what you will," the priest shrugged. "So long as your prices do not beggar the needy."

"Done." He leveled a hard stare at Trinne. "And since you and your friends are well-off enough to turn down a hundred silvers, normal prices for you."

"I don't care, just let us see your goods," Trinne waved him off, looking eagerly at the heavily burdened wagon. She could hear Morrigan muttering disdainfully under her breath, something about solving all the village's squabbles personally, but ignored the witch as she scanned for clothes among the goods.

The priest thanked them profusely before departing, and Alistair thanked her, in turn, for the blessing
she bestowed. He and Cousland turned their attention to the small supply of weapons the man stocked as Morrigan busied herself picking out food.

Trinne nearly shouted with joy when she found some things that looked her size--tunic, trousers, boots, and a leather jerkin, with a wide belt. Even better, she could feel a faint hum of magic as she picked them up. The clothes were enchanted, not heavily; so faint you'd have to be a mage--or full-fledged templar--to sense it. It was reassuring to know they would protect more than just her modesty.

When added to the daggers for Cousland, a shield that didn't reek of darkspawn for Alistair, and the foodstuffs Morrigan had compiled, it was *almost* more than they could afford. Would have been if not for the trinkets scoured off the dead bandits outside the city.

Trinne chewed her lower lip in thought. *Now I need a place a change... I bet the chantry has a secluded enough nook, and we need to go there anyway to find this Ser Donall.* Clutching the bundle with her new clothes against her chest, the mage started in the direction of the building.

"Um, Trinne?" Alistair raised an eyebrow at her as he slung his new shield across his back. "Where are you--"

"I need to change. Like *now*. And we need to deliver that note an' locket to that Donall fellow, so I figure two birds, one stone." She kept moving toward the archway leading to the chantry yard.

Only Alistair and Dane followed. It was her turn to raise an eyebrow, this aimed at Cousland and Morrigan. "Not coming?"

Cousland just shook his head--*Prob'ly still mad we axed the idea of lookin' for his brother*--and Morrigan snorted. "Why should I wish to set foot in there? 'Tis only asking for trouble; an apostate walking into a chantry. And I thought we were trying to *not* draw attention to ourselves."

Trinne shrugged off the pointed remark. "I'm willing to risk it. 'Sides, I'm not gonna look like an apostate much longer." Her fingers clenched tighter around the bundle. "But if you two spoilsports wanna stay out here, be my guest." She turned on her heel and resumed course toward the chantry, warrior and mabari trailing after her.

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The Cousland sword swayed slightly on the templar's back and as he watched the pair go, Harvey entertained a thought of simply calling after Alistair, taking the blade back and leaving for... wherever.

*Avenge him...* Did they really think it was that simple? They didn't understand at all--even without Fergus around, he had to deal with Rendon Howe as soon as possible, before the man revamped his betrayal into a story the public could swallow. The rogue's goals were neither their concern or priority.

*Plus this whole 'saving the world' business--a truly insane notion, if I ever heard one. Impossible. Grey Wardens were dead, and it means he could simply go now, without causing too many ripples.*

Leaving in this situation could almost be excused. *Almost.* If he stays, it would most likely mean dying in a ditch somewhere, before he could face his parents' murderer. He felt the wheels in his head turning, coming up with a plan without his conscious input. First, a careful journey up north, into the Coastlands territory, in search for allies. His father had his faithful bannermen, which ones of them were still alive after the battle? Which ones of them he could trust? And if what happened at
Ostagar was only a taste of the Blight, would they even care in the closing chaos?

Why did his feet feel so heavy?

He wondered if taking revenge would even matter, if Ferelden gets overrun by darkspawn. To him it would. *A small satisfaction of pushing your enemy off the rails, before the whole ship goes under.*

The templar and the mage disappeared behind the Chantry's gate, obscured by incoming refugees, before he could come to a decision.

Damn all this.

It got all tangled up -- responsibility to his family, and to the Wardens. *A Cousland always does his duty* -- but what to do with several of those, especially if they lead their separate ways?

"Not a talkative one, are you? Or is admiring the Chantry from the outside the thing you were after?"

The apostate's words brought him back to reality. For a moment he'd forgotten she was still there--she had this eerie way of standing perfectly still, like a wild animal hiding in plain sight. They hadn't spoken during their journey through the Wilds--he hasn't spoken much with anyone, to be fair--and the black haired woman was either exchanging words with Amell, or trading insults with Alistair. Now left alone, he still had no idea what to think of her, or of her strange mother. Amell wanted her here, so she had stayed, but...

"Just thinking," he said carefully.

"Wishing your companions were more sympathetic towards your plight perhaps?"

He shook his head, absentmindedly looking in the direction of the entrance. "They are sympathetic. Doesn't mean they'll go to any lengths for a stranger." *Doesn't change how I feel about it.* He rather wondered how the mage and the templar could be so eager to risk finding out if the treaties weren't only a glorified tinder. He envied their optimism.

His answer seemed to surprise her. "Oh? I reckon you were comrades?"

Harvey almost caught her bait, the witch's conversational tone earning her further personal confession. Not sure whether put his guard up....but he didn't really know her, he reminded himself -- or trust her, for that matter. What did she want from him? Was she curious, or would his words travel straight to their companions' ears? Or was she testing how much she could push his buttons before she'd get a rise, the way she taunted the mourning warrior? Either way, he didn't like it. He wasn't in the mood for games.

"You find grief amusing?" he asked instead, straightforwardness against her play--if she was indeed playing.

Morrigan's eyebrows arched ever so slightly, a sign that he might have been onto something. In all honesty he didn't expect her to answer. And yet...

"Not amusing, but perhaps useless," she eyed him head to toe. "And I assumed the blond oaf was the touchy one, but 'twould appear I was mistaken."

Touchy? Yes, he figured he probably was. For a good reason. *You talked me out of going after my brother, and now you're wondering why I'm angry?* But she surely understood, that this was...difficult. "And what would you do if your mother died?!" he asked.
Her smile was mischievous. "Before or after I danced on her grave?"

Suddenly, Harvey lost all will to continue this conversation. "...right."

Scanning the Chantry wall, his eyes finally found what he was looking for and he approached the Chanter's Board, not caring if the apostate followed. She did.

_Great, she found a new toy._

He paid no mind to the nearby Chanter, who greeted his interest in the board with a few more or less fitting verses of the Chant. The rogue simply nodded in his direction, eyes jumping from message to message, mind drifting back to Morrigan's earlier question. Truly, he wasn't deluding himself. Three people happened to end up companions by chance, and although there might have been a bit of camaraderie earned between the battles, none of them knew much about the others. This is what it was.

"Mind telling what you find so fascinating in this piece of wood?" the mage inquired, hints of impatience in her tone.

"We need money," the rogue shrugged.

"Tis why I'm asking, there's hardly anything on it," Morrigan pointed out.

"I guess..." He had to admit that one was true. Out of the few notices, the one about bandits looked most promising, but he doubted the three of them could do anything about it. _Two of them_, he corrected himself. Frida seemed to have followed her new friend. Or wandered off on her own, as always. "Doesn't change the fact we need money. And food. Real food. I want to eat something that isn't dry meat before we go."

_Or before I go._

"Indulging in luxuries," she accused, half teasing and half serious. "A spoiled boy!"

Harvey simply shrugged and held her gaze, unsure how a decent meal once in a blue moon could be considered as such. Exaggeration, obviously.

"Ah, alright, let us pull our weight," she finally gave. In a strange way she looked like she was enjoying herself. "Have it your way, I'll take care of the food. You can go and ...ask around for jobs, if you wish." He guessed the earlier squabble with the merchant was the peak of the witch's tolerance for interaction with the villagers and that was the only reason why she was offering. He didn't mind.

"Fine with me," he agreed.

She was gone before Harvey could ask her how she was going to hunt without a bow and arrows.
Honor and Dignity

It was noticeably quieter inside the chantry, the thick stone walls blocking out much of the hubbub of refugees outside. Trinne looked around, scanning for a place with enough privacy to change.

"What about over there?" Alistair suggested, pointing toward one of the prayer alcoves along the wall. It was currently unoccupied, and just big enough to serve her purpose.

"Good eye," Trinne commented. "It's been long enough since I was in a real chantry, I'd've missed that completely. I'll just be a minute." She ducked into the alcove, pulling the curtain shut behind her. Getting out of the Chasind robes was a bit trickier than she'd anticipated, mostly due to the thigh-high boots simply not wanting to come off. Fortunately, her new clothes went on easily, and she swiftly bundled up the Chasind garments and stowed them in her pack, figuring they could sell them to someone. They needed money, so even a little bit would help.

Alistair had moved off when Trinne emerged from the alcove, but she spotted him quickly. He was just across the room, conversing with a dark haired man in travel stained armor. Dane sat by the warrior's feet, scratching at one ear. The mabari must have sensed her approaching, because he wrenched around, tongue lolling and stubby tail wagging furiously as she reached them.

"Hey, boy," Trinne cooed, scratching Dane between the ears before meeting Alistair's eyes. "All better."

He glanced at her briefly and nodded, something like relief flickering in his eyes. "Trinne, this is Ser Donall."

One eyebrow quirked as she turned to greet the knight. "Didn't realize you knew him..."

"If it had occurred to me that I might, I would've said something," Alistair replied, catching the not-so-subtle reproach in her words. "He was telling me he was here looking for information on the Urn of Sacred Ashes."

Both eyebrows arched this time. "Whaddya want with a myth?"

"Arl Eamon is very ill," the knight explained. "Nothing else the healers have tried has worked, so we were hoping to actually find the Urn."

She'd never seen anything to suggest the Urn was anything more than a legend, but they had enough bad news to give the man without ruthlessly quashing his hopes for the arl. "Good luck with that. Are you working alone, or d'you have friends with you?"

"There were a few of us, yes. But we've split off so many times to investigate leads I'm pretty much on my own," he admitted. "Though I did send word to one of my fellow knights that he could join me here if his own leads did not pan out."

Trinne glanced at Alistair. You wanna tell him, or should I? The warrior didn't seem particularly inclined to break the news, so she sighed and got on with it. "This friend, his name wouldn't happen to be Henric, would it?"

One of Donall's eyebrows rose fractionally. "Yes, did you encounter him on the road?"

"Um... Yes and no." She groaned, wishing she didn't have to do this. "We... found his body. He had a note, mentioning your name, and that he was to meet you here. He also had this..." Trinne dug in
one of the side pockets on her pack until her fingers closed on the locket's tarnished chain. She pulled it out and handed it to the knight.

His posture seemed to wilt a little as he flicked open the golden casing and saw the picture inside. "Maker's mercy... Thank you for getting this to me. I shall ensure it makes it back to his wife." He grasped the locket tightly for a moment before slipping it into his pocket with a sigh.

"For whatever it's worth, we did kill the bandits responsible for his death," Trinne offered. "I know it doesn't bring him back, but..."

"It does give some closure. And I'm sure Agatha will be glad to know those responsible met justice. If you'll excuse me, I should be on my way." He crossed his arm across his chest and bowed in farewell.

"Well, that didn't go nearly as poorly as I feared it would," Alistair muttered.

"Heh, tell me about it," Trinne concurred, hand resting on Dane's head. "I was worried he would accuse us of killing the man ourselves."

"Beg pardon, ser, m'lady." The templar who spoke waited until they had turned to face him before continuing. "I couldn't help but overhear; you say you killed the highwaymen outside the city?"

Trinne nodded, self-consciously folding her arms over her chest. "We did."

"Truly?" There was a note of skepticism in the man's voice, and it was all she could do not to demand why that was so hard to believe.

Alistair's hand on her arm helped a lot with that. "We're traveling with friends," the warrior explained. "It wasn't just the two of us."

"Ahh, I see. Tell me, how did the leader die?"

Mage and warrior both hesitated, Trinne chewing on her lower lip as they tried to remember. "Run through with a sword," she supplied after a moment's thought. "He was the dark-skinned one, right? Yes, Alistair ran him through 'cause he refused to let us turn him over to you."

"She speaks true, ser," a redheaded templar corroborated. "We just finished examining the scene. They handled that lot right well."

"Saddened as I should be by the loss of life, I am simply relieved they'll not trouble us any longer." He nodded to the other templar, who brought over a small pouch, lumpy with coin. "Allow me to pay you the bounty set for their removal."

Normally she would have waved the man off, insisted she needed no reward for simply doing a good deed, but her growling and empty stomach reminded her being a Grey Warden required rather more food than she was used to eating, so Trinne simply nodded and took the money. "Many thanks, ser."

"No, no, it is we who should thank you," the templar insisted. "Those highwaymen have been a plague on the arriving refugees for weeks now. It is a blessing to have them no longer be a worry. Maker bless your travels." He bowed once, and then walked away.

She watched him leave, and then looked back at Alistair. "Well. Should we go try to find the others?"

The warrior hesitated, and she could see him mentally debating his answer. On the one hand, he
seemed to like Cousland well enough, but he and Morrigan were like oil and water. But he did nod reluctantly in the end. "Probably. We need to move on as soon as possible, wherever you decide to go first."

Trinne flashed him an encouraging as they headed for the chantry doors. "Well, at least I have my dignity back now, and you can look at me now without turnin' scarlet," she teased, tugging one sleeve of her new tunic.

Alistair took the ribbing in stride, even if he did blush once more. "That... is a rather good thing, yes."

_Good night, Trinne, are you flirting with the templar?!_ an inner voice reproved, but she brushed it off. She wasn't flirting, not really. Was she?

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Harvey deliberately chose a remote place -- at least two hundred feet away from the village, in the shadow of a steep hill, where obscured by high grass he could observe lone groups leaving Lothering, without fear he would draw somebody's undesirable attention. It was a slow day, considering the trouble brewing in the south. Not many people tried their luck, he counted only three groups in the last hour or so-- a few families traveling together, one of which was wealthy enough to own a horse and a wagon. He wondered if they had relatives somewhere up north, or did they figure out the unknown would still bring a better fortune than what awaited them here. They were mostly women and children, maybe a few old men worn out to the bone by working in the fields.

It wasn't the mass exodus the noble was expecting -- incomparably more refugees arrived at Lothering than ever left it.

There was also a man, whom the rogue spotted several times already --one time too many for comfort-- making rounds near the outskirts of the village. A bit suspicious, but he wasn't alarmed, at least not yet. Most likely it was someone whose job was to see to it that Harvey returns the things he had borrowed. Which he planned to do of course.

But above all, the noble let his thoughts wander.

The stone mortar creaked in his hands --his work was automatic, this part of his task not requiring too much mental input. A moment of solitude is what he needed to straighten out the buzz in his head. If he let the thoughts flow, a way to resolve his situation would surely present itself.

Harvey found himself grimacing. Yes it would...if he had a few days to think about it. He had hours, at most. He wished for at least one armed group intending to depart the village to appear - ideally soldiers, not highwayman, though that distinction often blurred during war times. Then he could just go and make arrangements, throw this work away and head north, Cousland sword be damned, as much as he'd regret leaving it later. He focused on the path leading towards the Imperial Highway, almost daring for such group to materialize out of thin air. Of course, nothing of the sort happened. And thinking of soldiers only reminded him of Highever troops. The rogue knew only a few of their names and faces, most of them serving their duties in the castle itself or in its nearest proximity. He wondered how many of them survived. How many knew of his family's demise? Did they return home just to pledge allegiance to the new lord, or be executed? Or were they shown no mercy at all? Things could have not gone better for Rendon Howe, as if the man himself could orchestrate every single detail of his plan to fall perfectly into place. Too perfectly, if he had to be honest. If the battle of Ostagar had been won, if even half of Highever's troops remained alive, they would have marched back home and gave Howe quite a fight. Did the bastard know victory wasn't to be found at Ostagar?
Harvey almost jumped, startled, when three dead rabbits hit the ground beside him, the audible thud softened by the shrubbery.

Morrigan shrugged at his reaction. "I've done my job, skinning and cooking is where I draw the line."

"I didn't see you," he accused, before he could stop himself. Wounded pride stung quite a bit.

"I have my ways. And you looked like you were enjoying yourself, making all those faces. T'would have been a shame to interrupt."

Harvey sighed. He inspected the dead animals laying by his feet. From the wounds he could tell they were suffocated, and one had its throat almost ripped open. "How did you..."

"Are those for a job you had found?" Morrigan brought his attention to various herbs he picked up earlier. They were laying around him in small piles.

"Yes," he said, reaching for a few leaves of elfroot, earlier question forgotten. "An elder woman looking after the sick in Lothering asked for a few healing poultices."

"And you decided to help a few souls cross to the afterlife, how thoughtful of you."

Wha... She was pointing at a few branches of deathroot and two madcap bulbs.

She wasn't implying that he could...But no, the young woman was inspecting the herbs with interest, and no accusations followed. One dry sense of humor if he ever heard one. Still, he felt uneasy about the assumption.

"These are for something else. I found a few more flasks than needed, and I thought I'd make use of them," he explained. Just to make things clear.

"Truly, I wouldn't suspect a spoiled boy such as yourself to know how to handle a mortar," she pointed out. "Color me surprised."

Oh yes, she was definitely having fun at his expense again. He was getting used to this, and quickly so. He didn't take her bait. "You take some weed and stir it in a small bowl, a delicate work indeed," he answered with a sour expression, "Though I'll admit, the recipes I know aren't very complex."

Elfroot based poultices in their simplest form cleansed the body and made the person feel better. They didn't require more work than boiling a pulp of elfroot leaves and roots till they turned a reddish color. Every fool with half of a brain could do that.

And he had more than enough pulp already for the three vials he needed. He got up and dusted himself off. "I saw an abandoned fireplace near the village outskirts, and maybe there's a stray pot laying around somewhere, who knows. We should move."

Setting up a fire in the tall grass was never wise.

Morrigan helped him gather things, and Harvey whistled a few times. Fire and food usually attracted unwanted company -- if Frida was around she'd show up, and a presence of a mabari will cause intruders to think twice before approaching.

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There was indeed an abandoned kettle, and after settling things up, Morrigan took over his task without so much as a word, as if she was sure she was going to accomplish a better job than he would -- and she was probably right. She was currently stirring the reddish brew.
Harvey couldn't figure her out. He half-heartedly wondered if the witch was going to try and stop him from leaving, if he suddenly decided to do so. He doubted it.

But for now...Thanks to her help he could focus on making a few snares out of the wire he had found, a request for yet another villager. Frida sprawled on the ground a few feet away from the fire, and did what was expected of her -- that is looked indisputably big and sharp-toothed.

The dog wasn't very happy at the moment. The rest of the harsh smelling herbs and a bit of clay made for a quick, makeshift kaddis - if you could even grace calling it that. Harvey painted her fur in chasind swirls, to repel bugs. He decided not to risk the usual Highever markings-- not many people were worldly enough to recognize them, but a few still would.

Frida definitely didn't like the smell.

Finally, it was Morrigan who broke the silence "You know you are earning coin from dead men?" There was not an ounce of disapproval in her tone, only curiosity. "This place will meet its doom soon enough, I wonder if they see it."

He knew what she meant. Life in Lothering was going about the best it could, even under the darkspawn threat. But with all the refugees coming in, Lothering was bursting at the seams. Still, people weren't willing to move on, for that reason or another. Did they think it was far enough, and the monsters wouldn't reach them here? Lothering was a large enough settlement to possess a Chantry, were they convinced they would be safe behind stone walls, protected by the few templars that resided within? Or by their faith? He had no doubts that the woman taking care of the sick, as well as the girl who requested the snares could be dead in a couple of days.

Still, he felt inclined to defend their choice, if not for any other reason than the witch seemed to find the notion foolish. Or maybe because he thought so too, a little.

"I think they do, inside. Some of these people lived all of their lives here. Everything they have...is here. Their homes and fields...they are tied to the land." They thought they could fight, defend themselves and their homes, or at least have the luxury to surrender when everything else fails. They didn't know darkspawn.

"This is a reason to die?"

Harvey shrugged, because he had no idea how to answer. His own home and life lay in pieces, abandoned, because he was given no choice. Would he had died then, if it wasn't for Duncan, or would he try to survive anyways? He wasn't sure.

"Alright," he changed the subject. "I'm finished, let's see those rabbits you brought."

He chose the nearest animal. A few cuts, a bit of force correctly applied, and the pelt was off. He saved it...they could always sell it later. Now a cut in the middle and not a minute later the guts were all out. Field dressing the game was something he actually enjoyed, even though it got messy sometimes. Too bad the carcass wasn't able to hang for a couple of hours, the meat would have been better. But as they say, don't look a gift-horse in the mouth.

Only as he was field dressing the second rabbit did he hesitate; the insides of the animal were... not as they should be.

Its liver was covered in darker spots, like rust covering old metal. There weren't many of them -- whatever had caused it, it had to be recent.
Those spots felt awfully familiar though.

"Taint?" he murmured in disbelief. How this small animal could contract the disease carried by darkspawn was beyond him. He felt Morrigan hovering over his shoulder, curious. He let her inspect it with her own eyes.

"It does posses its stench," she confirmed.

"I fail to remember rabbits fighting at Ostagar."

"Perhaps not, but a wounded soldier could have carried taint from the battlefield in his blood. It takes no more than a few strands of stained grass."

He wanted to say he thought only humans could get sick from it...but that wasn't the truth, was it? He knew mabari definitely could, so why not any other creature?

"Oh, don't look at me like that. Don't be mistaken... darkspawn, all of what they are, is a disease. T'is in the name. The darkspawn plague."

He again felt as if she was amusing herself, teaching a child about obvious things. He didn't really care. Maybe the enormity of what they had to face was finally sinking in.

"Does it rot everything?" he asked, a dead rabbit in his hands suddenly something more ominous than it could ever hope to be in life.

The witch stirred the insides of the kettle a few times and proceeded taking it out of the fire. He threw the carcass aside to help her, it was heavy. "Flemeth told stories of Blights lasting decades, even centuries in Thedas. They left whole lands barren, soil poisonous for plants, animals, and men alike, for even more centuries to come. Dark times indeed."

There it goes. The rogue could almost hear any decent reasoning for leaving and taking care of his own matters with dignity and honor intact crumbling. And she was telling the truth too, her words stirring some long forgotten memories, lectures the cranky tutor Aldous tried to drill into his head. Stories of Darkspawn hordes were a fairytale then, and the child part of his brain is where they had remained.

But the doors were open now, and as he quietly skinned the last rabbit--this one thankfully healthy--he listened to echoes of words long forgotten, trying to remember the details, and when it proved beyond him, he settled on a memory of what kind of stories they were. He remembered each Blight being described as the closest thing to an end of the world as it could be.

It wasn't long until the witch finished making poultices, filling seven small bottles with elfroot juice. He took three of them, the remaining four for their own use, and then grabbed the mortar and the snares--they weren't complicated traps, and he won't get much for them, but every coin mattered at this point.

"Frida, you stay with Morrigan," he told his mabari, when she perked up as he was going to leave.

"Your attempts at chivalry are quite unnecessary, I assure you. I'll be quite alright by myself," the witch objected.

He just shrugged. "How do you know I'm worried about you? Magic draws attention, so do corpses."

That gave her pause. "Little old me, capable of such a thing?" she asked in mock-offense. "I can be
quite nice when I desire to."

"I believe you."

Her smile was rather predatory. Golden eyes didn't help the whole picture.

Right. Was it him or was it really warm today? "Uhh...I'll just...run some errands. Go deliver ...these."

"He eyed the vials and traps and turned more somber. "And to find our companions...we need to plan what to do next. I don't think staying here for too long is a good idea."
"So, I gotta ask; why'd you stay a templar? Considering you don't seem particularly fond of the Chantry?" Trinne had just enough patience to wait until the solid wooden doors had closed with them on the outside before asking. Alistair had been nowhere near as reverent inside the solid stone building as she'd expected. The templars in the Circle practically shone with piety even in their small chantry. A place like this would have pulled an even more dramatic display out of them. Her fellow Warden, by contrast, had been respectful yet unawed. Considering unwavering devotion was pretty much a requirement in templar training, his attitude had her curious nature piqued almost beyond bearing.

Alistair shrugged, offering a lopsided grin. "Oh, come on. You must've seen the uniforms. I mean, they're not only stylish, but well-made. I'm a sucker for good tailoring."

She snorted, eyes dropping to her feet as they reached the stairs. "If that's so, y'might've been better served becoming a mage."

He chuckled. "You aren't kidding. There're times I'd swear the templar uniforms are only so colorful to keep them from feeling dull in comparison. I mean, the last thing you want upon cornering some maleficar in the woods is for him to point and laugh at your taste in clothing, am I right?"

Forget who're you're talking to, pretty boy? Trinne thought to herself. She raised an eyebrow at the blond. "You aren't worried about that anyway?" she asked archly, continuing out of the chantry courtyard.

Alistair actually laughed at that, a sound she'd not heard from him since Ostagar, pantomiming a blow to the heart. "Oh, ow, fair lady! Stab wounds to the pride are the worst!"

Trinnie giggled. "Have I slain you with my superior wit, ser templar?"

"Oh, yes, indeed you have," he riposted, staggering as if mortally wounded. "I shall never recover from your cruel words, I fear."

"Excellent, my plan is working," she teased.

"Ah, but now I'm onto you, you sneaky little devil."

"Hah, you have no idea how sneaky I can be."

"Well, I look forward to learning," he countered, eyes showing he was only half teasing.

"I-" she stopped the smart remark. Point for you, pretty boy... "So, where d'you think we should start looking for Cousland and Morrigan?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. They could be anywhere. If they're still together at all."

Dane yipped, and Trinne glanced down at her dog. "What, you wanna look around? See if you can find your girlfriend?" He yipped again, stubby tail wagging frantically. "Oh, fine. Go. If you find her, let us know."

The mabari took off in a blurring grey streak with a final happy bark. "I guess we should just poke around the village? See if we find them?"

Alistair nodded. "It's not like it's a particularly large village. How hard can this be?"
It actually turned out to be a more difficult than he anticipated, given Trinne's habit of getting distracted by the silliest things. Eventually, however, they made it to the edge of the village proper.

Trinne eyed the guard trying to settle a squabble between a merchant and a pair of Chasind, gauging if the man would appreciate an interruption. He looked focused enough on the dispute she decided against distracting him. "Hey, Alistair--" The words stuck in her throat as she turned and caught sight of the large cage behind the warrior and flat out stared at the occupant.

The tan skinned giant glowered at her when he noticed her attention was on him, violet eyes narrowing in disdain at her curiosity.

"What are you?" The question escaped as she dodged around Alistair to get closer to the cage.

"I am Qunari," he replied brusquely. "Sten of the Beresaad."

She felt her eyes widen. She'd read about Qunari, but never figured she'd meet one. Thought they were supposed to have horns... "What, are you a prisoner or somethin'?"

Sten snorted. "I'm in a cage, am I not?"

"True. Why?" His brow furrowed in confusion, so Trinne repeated, "Why are you locked up?"

His eyes darkened. "It does not matter. I am caged, and not likely to be released any time soon. Why should you care why?"

The mage bit the inside of her cheek to keep from snapping off a belittling remark. "Look, I'm not one of the people who locked you up, alright? We're just passing through with some... friends. We could use more help-" she elbowed Alistair as he started to protest- "and you look like you'd be good at that. Helping us kill darkspawn, I mean, so I'm just trying to figure out if we could get-"

"Darkspawn? Are you... Grey Wardens, then?" Sten interrupted, disbelief plain on his face.

"Yeah, we are. D'you think they'd let you go?" Trinne frowned at the skepticism on the Qunari's face. "What?"

"We have heard of the Grey Wardens among my people," he replied. "Great strategists. Peerless warriors. You appear to be neither."

"Looks can be deceiving," she shot back, miffed. Wow, okay, if you want me to go away just say so.

"Perhaps," Sten grunted, shrugging off her pique. "The chief priestess is the one who ordered me imprisoned. You should speak to her if you wish me released." His voice took on a note of sardonic enjoyment. "I doubt you will have much luck."

"We'll just see about that," Trinne muttered, turning on he heel and stomping back toward the chantry.

"Trinne." Alistair caught up with her in just a couple strides. "Are you sure about this? The Revered Mother wouldn't have locked him up without good reason. Maybe we should just leave well enough alone."

"C'mon, Alistair, tell me having a Qunari at our backs wouldn't be helpful," she pointed out. "He can glower people into submission."
"But we don't even know what he did," the warrior protested.

"And you don't know what I did that got me recruited," Trinne countered. "He told me he wasn't a blood mage!" "Yet you have no qualms letting me lead the bloody group."

"It can't have been anything too bad," he muttered as they crossed back over the stone bridge. "Duncan wouldn't have recruited you if... if..." the words trailed off, his voice catching on an almost-sob.

"Do you... wanna talk about him?" the mage probed cautiously.

Alistair shook his head, jaw set. "No, you don't have to do that."

She sighed and let it go. "Have it your way. You ever get ready to talk, I'm willing to listen. I know what it's like to lose your family."

"It's not the same," he muttered. "They aren't... dead."

She'd actually been thinking about the still-raw wound of losing Jowan, but the same principle applied, and she'd rather talk about the blood-related family anyway. "I know that, but I haven't seen them in almost fifteen years, so I've still lost them."

"I... understand that, I guess." Alistair sighed. "I just... really don't want to talk about this right now."

Trinne nodded, and the two of them re-entered the chantry in somber silence.

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The Revered Mother was gracious enough in greeting them, but her voice took on a decidedly suspicious note the second Trinne brought up the Qunari prisoner.

"It may have been kinder to simply execute him for his crimes, but I shall leave his fate to the Maker," she commented quietly.

Locked defenseless in a cage with a darkspawn horde bearing down? That's not 'leaving it to the Maker', that's a passive-aggressive execution that lets you feel like your hands are clean, Trinne seethed. But all that came out her mouth was, "And what crimes has he committed to deserve that fate?"

"He murdered a farming family," the priest replied. Trinne felt Alistair stiffen behind her as the woman continued, "Killed them with his bare hands, all save one of the youngest boys, who ran for help. Why are you so interested in him, if I may ask?"

The mage swallowed hard, squared her shoulders, and asked. "I'd like you to release him into my care."

The Revered Mother scoffed. "So his next victims can count you and me among their murderers? Absolutely not!"

"I'm not asking you to just let him go!" Trinne snapped, crossing her arms. "I'd take him with me, with us. We wouldn't let him kill innocent people."

The woman cast a skeptical eye over Trinne's clothes and Alistair's battered chainmail. "I think you may find him a tad harder to control than you envision, girl."

The mage snorted. "Your Reverence, we're Grey Wardens. I think we can handle a single Qunari,
If possible, the Revered Mother's gaze grew even colder. "You are... Grey Wardens? Teryn Loghain has declared your order traitors, responsible for the rout at Ostagar and the death of the king. I must request you leave this village with all haste. These people have suffered enough without you adding to their troubles."

"He... said... WHAT?!" Trinne exploded.

"Okay, time to go now." Alistair grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the door. "Excuse us, Your Reverence."

"Let go," Trinne growled, tugging slightly against his grip on her arm as the warrior hustled her away.

"After you calm down," he stage-whispered back. "You look about ready to spontaneously combust and burn this place to the ground."

"Not likely," she snorted. "Fire's never been my strong point. But, honestly, Traitors?! The man's the Hero of River Dane; I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt when Flemeth said he quit the field. But this... tell me you aren't pissed, too."

"Trinne, the man is blaming me for the... death of my mentor! Of course I'm angry!" He hauled open the chantry door and hurried them outside. "But losing our heads and getting thrown out of the village before we can resupply enough to have a fighting chance at gathering allies won't help us. I'm letting my anger simmer until it'll actually be useful."

"Very mature of you," the mage muttered, raking her fingers through her hair.

"I have my moments," Alistair shrugged.

"So... now what?"

"Well... we can keep looking til we find Harvey and Morrigan and then just leave. We could check at the tavern and see what people know, if there's a place to buy food..."

Trinne eyed him skeptically. "But... Morrigan already bought food from that other merchant. And for all we know, she an' Cousland are out hunting or something right now."

Alistair chuckled grimly. "Three of us are Wardens. We're going to need all the food we can get our hands on. And it probably still won't be really enough. Trust me."

Her stomach growled but she ignored it, still eyeing the warrior with a large dose of skepticism. "Okay, I will... You sure they have a tavern here?"

He gave a small laugh. "As long as there are at least five houses in a village, there's a tavern, Trinne."

She punched him in the arm. "Tower, thirteen years, no outside experience. Lose the implied 'silly goose'."

His grin widened. "I wouldn't dare. You'd probably turn me into a toad or something. Goose."

She wrinkled her nose and shoved him hard enough he nearly fell over. "Rat."

The warrior steadied himself against one of the railposts at the far end of the bridge. "Hey, now,
behave yourself. I'm on your side, remember."

"Yeah, yeah, I know..." Her teasing retort trailed off as they neared the tavern, which from the size of it probably doubled as the inn. A group of heavily armed men stood outside, positioned so you couldn't enter the tavern without walking through their midst. *They're looking for someone.* "Alistair..." Given the Revered Mother's attitude, it wasn't hard to guess who these men sought.

"I see them," Alistair confirmed, his voice grim. "Maybe they're looking for deserters, or an escaped criminal... Just because they look like bounty hunters doesn't mean they're after us."

Badly as she wanted to believe him, the gooseflesh crawling up her spine wouldn't allow it. "Right, and maybe I'm in line to be the next Divine."

"Let's just try walking past them and see what they do. We have to go in the tavern sooner or later."

"Oh, fine," Trinne sighed. *It would just fit with the rest of my day for these bastards to be after us.*

By now they'd drawn close enough one of the men had taken note, and jostled the leader's elbow. The man straightened from his spot against the tavern wall. "Well, well... It seems we were lied to boys." He sneered at Trinne as his men circled around behind her and Alistair, cutting off their escape. "We've been askin' around all day for a woman of your description, lass. And *everyone* said they hadn't seen ya. How about that..."

She snorted. "Sorry, you're not really my type."

He laughed, hard and mirthless. "Fiery one, ain'tcha? That's not our purpose. We're huntin' Grey Wardens."

The mage lifted one eyebrow in vague curiosity, deciding playing innocent was her best course of action. "Why?"

"Traitors, the lot of 'em. Killed the king. Teyrn Loghain's put a nice bounty on your heads," he leered.

"We did *no such thing!"* Trinne screeched, lightning crackling around her hands. She didn't hesitate, even as a red haired Chantry sister hurried over, hands raised in a placating gesture.

*Sorry, Sister. They want a fight, I'm only too happy to oblige.*

The lightning arced from her fingers as she heard Alistair draw his sword with a resigned sigh.

The one thing she didn't expect was for the Chantry sister to produce a dagger and join the skirmish alongside them.

*And where in the name of Andraste's pyre is Cousland?*

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The merchant tilted his head in visible resignation when Harvey presented him with raw rabbit pelts. It figured, the rogue wouldn't be the first one with a brilliant idea of earning some coin with leftover animal skin -- the refugees were far ahead of him, frantically selling what they could spare, and that included the things they picked up during their journey to Lothering. A lot of them knew how to hunt -- and thanks to a Fereldan habit of not wasting anything, the said item was overstocked at this
point.

So after inspecting the two coats -- Harvey threw away the one belonging to the sick animal -- the merchant gave him a price three times lower than the rogue knew it should have been.

Still, Harvey didn't haggle, happy the man was inclined to accept something for which finding the market was going to be a gamble.

The coins joined the pay for the potions and traps inside his satchel, together earning him a bit over one sovereign. It was maybe silly to be pleased with such amount, considering he was used to having enough for anything he needed... but the slight weight of metal bumping against his hip felt comforting.

Harvey crossed the bridge before sudden unease slowed down his pace, and he came to a halt.

Some sort of commotion erupted further down his path, obscured by the tavern, blocking his way back to Morrigan. *Mercenaries settling some kind of dispute?* His first instinct was to find a roundabout way, no need to meddle with a band of fools causing trouble.

Suddenly, an unmistakable crackle of magic shone above the roof, and the rogue realized he most likely belonged to that particular band of fools.

How many mages were around, eager to show off their abilities in a village full of templars?

*This day was going so well, too...*

The happening attracted curious onlookers—moderately cautious ones, observing the whole thing from a safe distance, treating the wooden fence as some kind of impenetrable shield. But most of them were leaving now, as soon as magic revealed to be a factor. As if a stray wisp of it could be more dangerous than a stray arrow.

The rogue would prefer to risk neither, if possible. And he'd rather not be a sitting duck, choosing the front entrance.

There was always a different way. No need to charge into a heart of conflict, especially if there was a chance he wasn't even a part of it. Looking around--there!--the tavern was surrounded by a stone wall, most of it a part of a longer structure, separating the few nearest buildings from what was on the other side. Trees...some kind of orchard, he guessed, no man-made structures... and it went parallel to the ongoing fight. Good, he'd move along the wall and take a peek at what was going on on the other side. If nothing relevant, he'll go back to the campfire. And in case he needed to interfere, he'd have the advantage of surprise.

No one took notice as the rogue neared and easily made his way across six feet of uneven stones, as if it was not challenge at all. He landed on an overgrown path, right between the main wall, and a smaller one fencing the orchard.

And...he wasn't alone. The wall followed a curve, but not in an acute enough angle to hide him from a stranger leaning fifty feet away. The man was standing almost vis-a-vis the ongoing feud -- Harvey didn't believe in coincidences.

The stranger noticed him too, dumbfounded, his foot in a crossbow's stirrup, in the middle of reloading.

He stared for a second, before doubling his efforts.
Harvey echoed his reaction, and started towards him, dagger in hand. Great, just great, I don't even know if he's an enemy. And the man had either decided already or didn't care if Harvey was one too.

But he'd get a clear shot, if he managed to reload, the path not unlike a narrow shooting range. He had to deal with this.

Faced with a charging opponent, the crossbowman was two seconds too short to reload and they both knew it. The crossbow traveled up, parrying the oncoming dagger. The man swung it like a mace, and as Harvey stepped back to dodge, he threw it away and unsheathed a smallish axe instead.

The noble breathed out in relief -- now that the distanced weapon was out of the way, fighting was not the only option. He carefully kept his distance. "Look, just tell me who you're shooting at, and I might leave, and give you no more trouble."

The man eyed him suspiciously, maybe trying to figure out if Harvey wasn't just trying to confuse him. He wasn't... muffled sounds of battle were coming to them from the other side of the wall, but if the fight wasn't his, Harvey didn't care. There was a small gap between the stones behind his enemy's back, the man must have been using it as a window for his crossbow. The rogue thought he heard a female voice shouting, but it might have been his imagination.

His opponent hesitated--his axe still ready to attack or defend--unsure if he could indeed waste his time. Finally he spat on the ground. "We're hunting the remaining Grey Wardens, traitors to our late king, on Teyrn Loghain's orders. If you're here to steal our bounty, you can just shove off."

Well, this changes things. Harvey's lips narrowed into a thin line as he aimed his weapon at the man's ribs, this time trying his opponent's abilities. The dagger was once again deflected, the defense almost identical. Bounty... not good. Harvey didn't know why it never dawned on him before, but political play made far more sense than Loghain quitting the field because of simple cowardice. From what the man was implying, now the Wardens were the bad guys. He was a bad guy. Things were complicated once more.

He--the dagger and the axe clashed--just couldn't--his second dagger was suddenly in motion--catch a break--connecting with a weak temple bone, crushing it, right into the soft tissue--could he?

The mercenary spasmed, a small trickle of blood pouring out of the wound, and fell to the ground motionless. Harvey just stared at the body, a bit surprised by his own tenacity. But... he has had enough of this. Of everything. He retrieved the blade with a sickening sound.

He didn't have time.

Now, to take a peek at what was happening out there. Daggers still in hands, he reached and looked through the uneven gap between the stones... and at the last moment ducked three feet of stone projectile aimed at his head. It hit the wall and shook it at the base--he reflexively shielded his head from the oncoming damage. The wall held, but the air filled with dirt and dust--it entered his nostrils and Harvey fell into a coughing fit.

"It's COUSLAND!", the rogue managed. Bloody void, it got in my eyes.

A moment of bewildered silence and then a faraway "whoops, sorry", was all he got. At this point he was starting to suspect Trinne Amell was actually an assassin with a contract on his head, trying time and again to make his death seem like an accident.

He felt for a small canteen filled with water strapped to his belt and rinsed the dirt out of his eyes, until he was certain every bit of it was gone. At that point, the battle sounds were replaced by quiet
murmurs typical for talking. He risked another peek through the hole. There they were, Amell, Alistair, and a red headed Chantry sister Harvey had never seen before, all of them hovering over two kneeling men, three more bodies laying around.

*Well, I guess I should join them now.*

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"You are out of your sodding mind, Sister!"

Harvey quietly joined Alistair on the sidelines, the man following the back and forth like a sparring match.

"What's going on?" he mouthed, even though he already had his suspicions.

"Oh, here you are, we were kind of looking for you." The warrior genuinely brightened up at the sight of him, and it took Harvey aback a bit. Alistair gave the rogue a quick smile of acknowledgment, before nodding in the direction of two arguing women. "Miss Chantry here wants us to spare those guys, even after they were sent to capture us," he shrugged. "They did surrender though," he added grudgingly.

*Oh.* And it must have been the exact reason the warrior was standing on the sidelines, instead of chiming in. Templars were no strangers to chivalry. Neither was Harvey, unfortunately. There were certain rules rooted so deep you followed them without thinking -- you don't kill a man who laid his weapon before you... even if the outcome might prove troublesome. It was treated in some circles as a disgrace, almost.

The mage seemed to be more of the practical sort. "They were going to *kill* us!"

"But they failed, and I do not wish death on anyone." The red haired woman was trying to soothe Amell's outrage.

...Without much luck. The mage's stance was almost aggressive, adorned with an incredulous expression, as if she couldn't believe they were even discussing this. The Chantry sister on the other hand seemed open--firm in her conviction, but not begging. She was a confusing individual, Harvey decided--at first he thought she joined in after the battle, using the Chantry's authority to stick her nose into other people's matters. Her torn and bloodied robe proved otherwise, she must have fought at their side, which was all in all unexpected. And... she carried herself lightly and with an agile grace of someone whose interests didn't narrow down to priesthood.

"Well *excuuuse me* if we will be the ones to decide their fate, since it was *us* they were after!" The mage insisted.

A very valid point, but one the cleric managed to use to her advantage. "Then your companions are alright with murdering defenseless men?"

This was an argument the mage couldn't tackle without help. Or she could have, if she had chosen to be dismissive--but to Harvey's surprise she did turn to her companions.

Not that they could help her much. Spotlight suddenly on both Harvey and Alistair, they had to wear similar undecided expressions, because Trinne frowned when she didn't find immediate support.

The warrior conceded quickly enough, his hands up in defense, before she managed to say anything.
"I'll trust your judgment on this one. We are at war," he shrugged.

Harvey still wasn't convinced.

"Really, Cousland?! There was someone shooting at us from the other side of the wall, don't tell me you two had a drink and then you let him go!"

"He's dead," the rogue hesitated. "It's different though, he gave me no choice." He wondered how far he was crossing into the lie territory... The man didn't give up, but neither did Harvey give him the chance before his frustration took over. Maybe he would have surrendered, maybe not.

"Different?! He told terrible lies about us, he said Grey Wardens killed the King!" She pointed accusingly at the man who--looking at the armor quality--had to be the leader. "We can't just let them go!"

Maybe she was right, but...

It was different, wasn't it? This had already become a spectacle... with far too many witnesses. "You want to kill defenseless men in sight of all these people to prove we aren't murderers? What they'll remember is Loghain's men kneeling in the mud and you as the executioner. You really want that?"

She gazed around to see who he was referring to, but found no one. "What are you talking about, there's no one here!" she exclaimed.

"Then look again. I really doubt we can afford making any more enemies."

She rolled her eyes, but humored him. Indeed, as soon as the killing started, people magically dispersed. Not a person in sight, and yet... something moved near the wooden fence, and the quiet was too forced, even daily life sounds seemed muted--smoked windows in the tavern observed, almost tense in anticipation.

The rogue wasn't blind to these details, and now that he pointed them out, the mage wasn't either. After a while she groaned. "Fine. FINE." She threw her hands in exasperation. "They'll go straight back to Loghain though," she muttered.

"Yes, and they'll tell him Grey Wardens know the truth, won't you?" Harvey addressed the leader specifically.

The man nodded his head all too eagerly. "Yes, everything!"

Good.

"You heard him, scram!" Amell delivered a solid kick to the leader's behind and he stumbled, almost falling to the ground. She pointed towards the village outskirts. "And don't even look back. If I see you again, I swear I will turn you into toads, and then stomp on you."

She was still disgruntled as they watched the two men leave, carrying their third and only companion who was still breathing. Without missing a beat, Trinne turned to the chantry sister with a gleam in her eye.

"Now, who are you, exactly?"
The red haired woman introduced herself as lay sister Leliana of the Lothering Chantry, and surprise, surprise, there was a specific reason hiding behind her aid, beyond simple altruism.

"Those men said you're a Grey Warden? You will be battling the darkspawn, yes? That is what Grey Wardens do?" Her eyes shone as she spoke to Trinne, with eagerness that stumped Harvey. She sounded so excited, he was on the verge of telling her the job was grossly overrated. *Not quite as upstanding as the old stories would like you to think.*

But Sister Leliana had never faced Darkspawn before, so her next words came easy: "I know after what happened you'll need all the help you can get. That's why I'm coming along."

"Glad to hear we have any say in it!" Amell's tone remained within the borders of politeness, even while dripping with sarcasm. Harvey wondered if she regretted not being able to deny their affiliation with the Wardens, but after her earlier outburst it would never work. "Why would you even want to join us, it's not fun and games ya' know. Not that we're in a position to refuse help, but..."

"The Maker told me to join you!" the woman blurted out.

Strange, how a few words spoken in a particular order could sow such deep, uncomfortable silence. It lasted five seconds, resting heavy, and then became quite unbearable as it reached eight and counting.

The mage was speechless, her left eye twitching.

*Andraste's dirty socks, she broke her.*

"I...think that's our cue to leave." It was Alistair who broke the spell, his tone a mix of jest and uncertainty. The attempt was admirable, but the joke fell flat as red flags were flapping in all of their heads already. There were certain individuals who could cause more trouble than it was worth, and Sister Leliana was on the verge of joining their ranks.

Trinne snapped out of her daze, and nodded sharply in agreement, her face almost relieved. "Yes, I think we are done here. But we really do appreciate your help Sister, really," she assured the young woman.

"I...I know that sounds... absolutely insane— but it's true! I had a dream... a vision!"

Harvey suddenly wished someone would stop Sister Leliana from digging her hole. What was at first strange, now was quickly becoming painful.

Alistair shook his head. "More crazy? I thought we were full up."

"They say only crazy people don't know they're crazy." Harvey retorted quietly, a bit against himself, because he too felt the further they get away from here, the better.

"So she's like... half crazy, then?" the warrior wondered.

The rogue shrugged, undecided.

"Come on guys, let's go." Trinne hurried them up.
"Wait!" the girl called after them, sheer desperation on her face. She looked around, as if searching for something, anything that would act as leverage. Harvey's gaze fell on the corpses. Oh no. The templars would be there in a matter of minutes, and Sister Leliana was the only credible witness.

Who are they going to believe, a couple of wanted people, because that's what we are, or a lay Sister of the Chantry, whom they probably knew? He cursed internally. Here it goes.

But it didn't go, not in the direction of blackmail anyway, catching him completely off guard. "Look at the people around you. They are lost in their despair, and this darkness, this chaos... will spread. The Maker doesn't want this. What you do, what you are meant to do, is the Maker's work. Let me help!" she pleaded.

Alistair glanced in Harvey's direction. "You suddenly got red," he mouthed.

Yes, from embarrassment. When did he get so bitter as to suspect foul play on a whim? She wasn't even a member of the clergy, not really--maybe a bit overzealous in her belief, but that was that. She most likely didn't have bad intentions...even if there was a few tiles missing from the roof.

And maybe that's why they were even still talking to her. Trinne finally groaned. "Look, even if you go with us, we've got little need for midday sermons!"

The readhead was prepared for this particular argument. "I can fight. I can do more than fight. I was not always a lay sister--I put aside that life when I came here, but if it is Maker's will, I will take it up again. Gladly. Please let me help you."

What happened then was a three ways look between Amell, Alistair and himself. The templar just sighed as the rogue gave them both a small shrug. It wasn't a lifetime sentence... and if she gave them any trouble, they could always part ways later.


"Thank you! I appreciate being given this chance. I will not let you down," Leliana beamed.

"Well, welcome to our little 'save the world' team, then. Trinne Amell," the mage introduced herself. "These two are Alistair and Cousland, and I guess they can tell you the details themselves, if you ask them. Or at least Alistair will. The second one is a bit of a grump."

Alistair gave a little wave, and Harvey said nothing.

"Aaand I see we are one member short, where's Morrigan?"

The rogue nodded in the general direction of the campfire. "She's minding the food." He wanted to say 'was preparing', but that would probably be a stretch.

"Good, I think we are all starving." Trinne started walking, while the rest of the group followed. "We need to plan what to do next, since Lothering's hospitality is running out." She made a face. "Shame about the qunari though."

It sounded strange without additional context, but before Harvey could even begin to imagine the meaning behind her words, the mage's eyes widened in sudden revelation.

"You, you can help!" she turned to the rogue, excited.

What kind of mental shortcuts she was treading to end up looking at him like he was a solution to all
her current problems was beyond Harvey. "With Qunari?" he asked dumbly. She had to backtrack her story a bit. Preferably to the beginning.

The mage briefly explained what she had meant, about her idea and what happened when they approached the Revered Mother in the Chantry, but the rogue was still lost to his own role in this.

"Don't you see?" Amell explained. "You are a noble, can't you just persuade her to let you take the prisoner under your jurisdiction? You're the son of a Teyrn, it has to mean something to her!"

The train of thought might've made sense under certain conditions, Harvey supposed. He wasn't going to enjoy bursting her bubble, even if Amell's naivety resulted from sheltered life in the Circle. Nobles had first say when it came to the fate of criminals, even before the Chantry. The fact that a Mother was the one responsible for exacting this particular punishment, could only mean that...

"She's going to shield herself with the absence of the local bann. It's him I'd have to talk to make that deal. And if he's not here, it means he's either fighting in the field, or dead. We can't wait for him."

"Damn." As quickly as it sparked, her excitement withered into disappointment. The mage kicked a nearby pebble, causing it to bounce off of a larger rock and disappear into the grass.

Harvey wasn't sure why he was still babbling. "If we were in the Coastlands, then maybe, but..." If he had a Cousland seal, or some kind of official document...still, bringing that up wouldn't do any good. He wasn't being in any way helpful.

"Well, if she doesn't recognize Grey Warden authority during the Blight, I'm not sure she'd listen to anybody." Alistair chimed in.

Trinne sighed. "I guess. It's really a shame, though. We could've found a better use for him than wasting in that cage."

As much as Harvey was torn at the thought of traveling with a criminal, he had to admit she was probably right. Plus, it was cruel, foremost. It depended on an individual style of governing, but you rarely saw this kind of punishment dealt in Highever. If the criminal deserved death, he at least received it quickly.

"I... think I could help you with that." Sister Leliana, who up till now has been trailing behind, was wearing a thoughtful expression.

"You could?" Trinne perked up, with a hint of disbelief.

Leliana mused, "Mother Euridice is... hard-headed in her decisions, but not unreasonable. I'm sure she would see the opportunity for doing Maker's work. He sometimes chooses the most unlikely of agents."

Harvey tilted his head. Like you?

"Well, that's what I told her!" Trinne groaned in exasperation. Harvey could see Alistair making the 'more or less' gesture with his hand as she did so. "But noo, she won't let him go without any supervision," she huffed.

"That's where I come in, no?" Leliana gave her a mischievous smile.

*You contrive quite well, Sister.* Harvey congratulated the woman quietly. He couldn't say he was very much impressed, because the opportunity presented itself way too easily, but she didn't hesitate
to grab it nonetheless, making a favor into her personal rite of initiation. Messages received from higher powers aside, she might actually be an asset.

"I think we got off from a wrong foot. I like you already!" The mage grinned. "Chantry it is!" she announced, changing directions abruptly.

The noble didn't follow.

"Cousland, aren't you coming? Or are you afraid you're melt upon crossing the chantry's premise?" Trinne waved her hand, Alistair chuckled, and Leliana gave him a weird look. "Come on, this ought to be good."

Harvey shook his head. The reason was far more mundane. "There will be six of us, if this works, and only two rabbits to share, I doubt it's enough. The inn ought to have some food...unless there already is a shortage..." he wondered aloud. Does anyone know how much qunari eat?

Leliana shook her head. "Lothering is still well supplied in this regard. Provisions are more expensive maybe, but everything has been lately."

Trinne nonchalantly tossed a satchel full of coin in his direction. He caught it. "Surprise us. I think after the last few days we all deserve a good meal. And ale," she added as an afterthought. "I always wanted to taste dwarven ale. Ask if they have any."

He doubted that was the case, but still nodded his head.

"Morrigan is that way?" the mage pointed to make sure.

"Pass the last cottages, and then fifty yards to the right," he confirmed.

And then they went their separate ways.

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"So I assume you have a plan for dealing with the Revered Mother's stubbornness?" Trinne probed as they approached the chantry once more.

Leliana smiled innocently. "I'm going to say please."

The mage snorted, raking one hand through her hair. "Good luck with that."

"Oh, trust me," the redhead replied, still smiling, "I can be very persuasive."

Trinne raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"After all, you let me join you, no?"

Drat. Point for the Sister, Trinne conceded mentally as Alistair hauled open the large wooden door.

"Ladies first," he bowed.

Leliana giggle. "Why thank you, kind ser."

Something irrational tightened in Trinne's chest and she shook it off irritably. "Let's get this over
with. The woman doesn't much like me, and frankly, the feeling's mutual."

"Leave the talking to me," Leliana admonished, brushing primly at the blood spots freckling her robe. "She'll be more receptive of me making the request."

"Wouldn't dream of doing otherwise," Trinne muttered, dropping back so Leliana was the first one through the doorway.

"Ah, Sister Leliana," the Revered Mother greeted her cheerfully enough. "How are you on this fine day?"

"I am quite well, Your Reverence," Leliana replied, inclining her head respectfully. "If you have a moment, I needed to discuss something rather important."

"Of course, my dear." The Revered Mother's gaze caught Trinne and Alistair hanging back near the doorway and she scowled. "Have they roped you into pleading their case, Leliana? You need not assist everyone who begs for your aid."

"I offered to ask, Your Reverence," the redhead corrected, tone still even under the older woman's remonstrance. "I believe their cause is a righteous one. One the Maker would see us aid, no? Why else-"

One hand rose abruptly, followed by the woman herself. "Sister Leliana, I believe in your vision. And I admire your passion to do the Maker's will. But what assurance do you have to offer that freeing that... monster is indeed the Maker's will, and not the misguided zeal of traitors?"

Alistair's hand latched onto Trinne's arm and squeezed ever so slightly before she even opened her mouth.

"These are... desperate and dangerous days, Your Reverence," Leliana began carefully. "I believe that with us--" she placed less than subtle emphasis on the word--"the qunari could make a difference. He could help. Quite a lot. Consider it part of his penance. And we can keep him from repeating the massacre at the farmhouse. Please."

The Revered Mother deliberated for a painfully long moment before nodding. "Very well." She crossed to the desk and slipped a key from the top drawer, handing it to the redhead. "I trust your judgment, Sister. Do not give me cause to regret it."

"Thank you, Your Reverence. You won't." Leliana turned and gave Trinne a triumphant smile as they headed out the door. "Here you go." She handed over the key.

"Gotta say, I'm impressed," Trinne admitted as she took it. "Nice work."

"You are too kind," the redhead demurred. "Now, if I am to join you, is it possible you have something... more suitable for me to wear? It doesn't seem practical for me to go into battle wearing this."

The mage winced in chagrin. "We sold everything we weren't usin' to buy food... an' stuff." She picked guiltily at one sleeve. "I dunno how much we have left..."

Alistair worked a coin purse free of his belt and peered inside. "I think there's enough in here for some half-decent leathers. Hopefully." He glanced at Trinne, waiting for her nod of assent before
handing it over to the redhead. "D'you want us to wait for you?"

Leliana shook her head. "No need. I know the place where you will be heading. I shall join you shortly."

"Suit yourself," Trinne shrugged. "Don't be too long, or we'll have to send a search party."

"Of course," the redhead nodded. She split off as they left the chantry, heading for the merchant's cart.

"I don't get her," Trinne muttered, idly picking at a loose thread on her tunic.

"Whaddya mean?" Alistair raised an eyebrow as they walked back toward the caged qunari. "She seems sincere about helping us. And she can definitely handle herself in a fight."

"I... I dunno. With all her talk about having a vision, and the Maker wanting her to help us... She just seems sort of... off. Like she's a few books shy of a library, or an archdemon short of a Blight."

He shot her a marginally amused look. "Okay, first of all, not funny. Second, even if you're right, she's more 'ooh, pretty colors' than 'I am Princess Stabbity, muahahaha stab-kill-kill'."

Trinne laughed. "Princess Stabbity? Have I mentioned yet that you're really strange, ser ex-not-quite-templar?"

"Hey, you got it right," he joked, lightly bumping his shoulder against hers.

She made a face and bumped back. "I'll prob'ly still call ya Pretty Boy a lot. It's easier to say."

"Lovely. My dream come true," Alistair deadpanned, which made her giggle even harder.

>>X<<

They stopped at the cage and released Sten, much to the qunari's surprise. He admitted to not thinking the Revered Mother would part with the key.

"You just gotta know the right people," Trinne shrugged, sensing Alistair's eyeroll behind her back. "Speaking of people, we need to meet up with the rest of ours." And where the blazes is my dog...

Sten grunted in what sounded like displeasure, but followed. Fortunately, between Cousland's directions and the thin plume of smoke trailing upward from the fire, the meeting place wasn't terribly hard to find. Even more fortuitously, Dane was there, flopped spread-eagle next to Frida. Both dogs wagged their tails as the mage approached, Dane letting out a small whine of joy.

Morrigan looked up at the noise. "Ah, and here you are at last. Though you appear to have traded the Cousland boy for this giant?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Nah, Cousland's buying more food. He figured with two new people we'd need more than what we already had."

The witch bristled ever so slightly. "I cannot be held responsible for that. Tis only thanks to me we have anything in the first place."
Trinne held up a hand. "Whoa, sheath your claws. You're not one of the new people. This is Sten--" she gestured to the qunari-- "and Leliana went to buy leathers. They're the new people. Cousland was pretty sure two rabbits wouldn't feed six of us. Not to mention the dogs'll need to eat, too."

Morrigan waved her off. "I don't suppose, in the process of your... recruitment drive you managed to stumble across more coin, hm? Because if your fellow Warden is buying food, and one of your new friends is acquiring armor, I do not foresee us having an overabundance of wealth when they return."

"Don't be such a sourpuss," Trinne admonished. "We didn't find sacks of unclaimed riches laying around for the taking, but there were some job postings on the chanters' board. Killin' bandits and bears shouldn't be too hard, right?"

"Most bandits around here are going to be hard men, driven even harder by desperation," Alistair warned her. "It might be tougher than you think. Besides, shouldn't we at least wait for Harvey and Leliana to join us and decide as a group what to do next?"

"Oh, fine," the mage sighed. He did sort of have a point. "Oh, look, here comes Cousland."

Sure enough, the dark haired rogue was making his way toward them, one hand gripping a sack of provisions, the other twined in the strap of a good sized drinking flask.

"No dwarven ale, sorry," he informed Trinne with an apologetic shrug. "We have to make do with water."

"Damn. Oh, well. One of our treaties is with the dwarves, so I'll get to try it at some point in this adventure. For now, let's eat. I'm starving."

"Told you," Alistair whispered, and she elbowed him in the ribs.

>>X<<

They talked as they ate, discussing what they should do next, asking Leliana's opinion when the redhead joined them a few minutes later.

To her extreme surprise--shock, really--Trinne found Cousland agreed with her; that doing these jobs was worth the risk and the delay because they needed coin now. They didn't even have enough to buy Sten armor. Alistair and Leliana were both antsy to get going so they could work on ending the Blight, Morrigan saw no point in solving more "petty villager problems of no real consequence", and Sten refused to express any opinion whatsoever.

"Ya know what? We're getting nowhere with this. Bottom line, we need money. Sten still needs armor, not to mention a sword, and we'll have to buy food along the way or we won't even make it to our first destination. We're doing at least a couple of these jobs," Trinne decided.

No one argued. And when it was all said and done--and they had added a sovereign's worth of silver to the purse--no one complained, either. They'd even gotten lucky enough to get Sten outfitted--one bandit group was led by a qunari mercenary. Who Leliana had dispatched with a single arrow. His chainmail wasn't particularly high quality, but they weren't in a position to be choosy.

Finally, with everything they could do in Lothering accomplished, Trinne led the way toward the Imperial Highway. Right then, let's go save the world...
The chittering vertigo of darkspawn presence slammed into her like a stonefist to the gut.

"Help! Help us!"

Oh, that can't be good.
Rememberance

Trinne charged into the fight with no real plan beyond *kill darkspawn* and hoping the others followed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Leliana pause ever so briefly, hands faltering as she nocked an arrow.

Alistair showed no such hesitation, barreling past the mage as she conjured a lightning spell. He rammed *hard* into the heavily armored hurlock leader, lowering his shoulder at the last second to put extra force behind his shield as he struck.

With a flick of her wrist, Morrigan froze the nearest genlock archer, and Sten's sword connected hard enough to shatter it into a thousand crystallized shards. Cousland darted through the newly created gap, heading for one of the darkspawn who lurked further back. The rest of the monsters were dispatched easily enough. The six of them were working better as a team than Trinne had dared hope. The pair of mabari and nearly even numbers to their foe helped, sure, but they were still shaping into a good team.

As Leliana and Cousland turned their attention to seeing if the darkspawn carried anything they could use, Trinne turned *hers* to the pair of dwarves they'd just rescued.

The older of the two introduced himself as Bodahn and the other as his son, Sandal. "Mighty timely arrival, my friend. We're much obliged."

"Not a problem," Trinne replied with a smile. "I'm always happy to kill darkspawn."

Bodahn chuckled. "I can see that. I don't suppose there's any chance we might be traveling in the same direction?"

"You do not want to travel with us, dwarf," Morrigan interjected dryly. "On that, you have my word."

He glanced back at Trinne, eyebrow raised in an unspoken question.

She sighed, rolled her eyes. "Me an' these two--" one hand waved in the general direction of Alistair and Cousland-- "are Grey Wardens. Fighting darkspawn's a major part of our job description."

"I see..." Bodahn looked over at his son and pursed his lips. "Then perhaps it's better if we go our own way. No offense taken, I hope?"

"Oh, no, none at all," Trinne assured him. "Stay safe."

"We shall do our best, Warden." With a last nod of thanks, Bodahn turned his attention to cleaning up the supplies that had tumbled from his cart.

"Got everything?" Trinne asked the rogues, receiving a pair of nods in return.

"Everything we might use," Leliana clarified. "There wasn't much, I'm afraid."

"Every little bit helps," the mage shrugged. "Let's go. We can still make some good progress today before we lose the light."

"Progress to where?" Alistair piped up. "We still haven't figured out where we're going first."

Trinne gnawed at her chapped lower lip for a minute, debating the merits of the choice she wanted to
Oh, sod it. Let's get it over with...

"The Circle. That should be quick. An' then we'll go talk to this arl of yours." This would be best. They'd walk in, flash the treaty, and be out plus one ally before Greagoir could do much growling about seeing her again. She gave a deliberate nod. "Yeah. We're going to the Circle first."

"And that's where D... Where you were recruited, isn't it?" Alistair commented, covering his verbal stumble with a cough. "You doing the asking should make it easier for them to swallow, right?"

Oh, sure, Pretty Boy. The Knight-Commander is going to be thrilled to see me... Trinne thought ruefully, not wanting to dwell on That Series of Events. But all she said was, "We can only hope."

The less they knew about That, the less they'd pry. And Maker knew it was the last thing she wanted to talk about.

>>>X<<<

It was amazing how quickly the little details could slip your mind. For instance, she managed to completely forget how long the road to Lake Calenhad would be. She'd had wildly optimistic estimates of making it at least halfway before they stopped for the night.

A hope Alistair had quashed the first time they stopped to rest, when he pulled out a tattered map to show her what road to take.

"How long d'you think it'll take us to get there?" Trinne asked, wanting to figure how the distance on the vellum translated to time estimates.

The warrior bit his lip and calculated briefly. "Rate we're traveling? Two more days. Maybe three? Depends on the weather, and if we get, um, sidetracked."

"Three more days?" Trinne glared at the map, as if doing so forcefully enough would cause the distance to shrink.

"Yeah, sorry," he shrugged apologetically. "If we'd gotten an earlier start and hurried we could maybe have shaved off half a day, but we spent more time in Lothering than I think any of us were expecting."

"But we needed supplies an'... stuff," the mage muttered, shoulders rolling almost sheepishly under the weight of her leather jerkin.

"No, I know," Alistair hastily assured her. "And I'm sure the extra help will be good. I'm just saying the amount of time we spent in Lothering is why it might take three days to get to Lake Calenhad. Might."

"Still longer'n I was expecting." Trinne glowered as she stood and resumed walking. Two more days. Forty eight more hours for the dread coiling in her stomach to grow. Two days in which to imagine every worst case scenario that sprang to mind for meeting Greagoir and Irving again. Fantastic.

"You do realize that if you do not slow your gait, it shall be naught but the two of us against any foes we encounter." Morrigan's almost bored tone cut through the images already blossoming in Trinne's mind, and she--grudgingly--slowed her pace ever so slightly.
"Why do you care, anyway?" she asked the witch, glancing over her shoulder to see how far back the others had fallen. "I didn't think you particularly liked any of them."

"'Tis simply pragmatism," Morrigan shrugged. "Bandits prey upon the travelers of roads such as this even when monsters do not roam freely. Do you imagine 'twill be any better with things so desperate? We make a far more dangerous--and thus less favorable--target if we keep together."

"Ah, so it's not that you're warming to us or anything," Trinne teased, half-smile pulling at her lips.

"Perhaps I would warm faster were there less idle chatter involved." The witch raised an eyebrow pointedly at the Circle mage. "'Tis one thing in the noble's favor that he knows how to keep his mouth shut."

"What, Cousland?" Trinne rolled her eyes. "Yeah, he's so good at it, sometimes I forget he does actually speak."

A short, hard exhalation that might have been almost a laugh sounded from Morrigan. "Better that than the opposite, as your other fellow Warden so aptly demonstrates."

"You mean you don't like Alistair?" Trinne giggled in mock surprise. "And here I was thinking the two of you would be such good friends."

The witch snorted. "I would rather befriend a rabid wolf."

"I can hear you, you know," Alistair commented dryly as the other four caught up with the mages. "And did you never hear that gossiping is impolite?"

"So is eavesdropping," Trinne shot back, smirking.

He tilted his head in a silent concession of that point. "But is it really eavesdropping when you talk loud enough we can't help overhearing?"

She pursed her lips in thought, raking one hand through her hair. "Mmm, yes. 'Cause if you two would try to make friends y'wouldn't've been bored enough to 'overhear' us."

"That doesn't even make sense," Alistair protested.

The mage shrugged. "So? Who says it has to make sense? Shoo, lemme talk to Morrigan in peace."

"Ah, so the interrogation continues," Morrigan commented archly as the warrior dropped back a few paces, still muttering under his breath.

"Yep. Though it's not really an interrogation," Trinne said. "I'm not after your darkest secrets. I just wanna talk."

"'Tis much the same thing, but as you wish," Morrigan shrugged.

The Circle mage fell silent for a moment, trying to decide what to ask the other woman. "So... did you grow up in the Wilds?"

"Any number of cats could inform you of the answer to that question," Morrigan returned tartly.
"But have it your way. If I 'grew up' in the Wilds 'tis indeed an odd question. Did you picture me elsewhere?"

"There are stories of the Witch of the Wilds dragging off children in the night," Trinne commented.

"Chasind legends," Morrigan scoffed. "I am truly Flemeth's daughter. For many years, in fact, 'twas just the two of us. The Wilds and its creatures were more real to me than the tales she told about the world of men. Eventually I did grow curious. I left the Wilds to explore beyond its borders. Never for long, of course. Brief forays into the 'civilized' world." Her voice dripped sarcasm off the words.

"And no one noticed you?" Trinne raised a skeptical eyebrow, glancing at the Witch's revealing attire. It was the sort of thing that would stand out.

"For the most part. Flemeth taught me well." Morrigan tilted her chin up in subtle pride.

"Still, that was daring. Sounds like you."

The witch laughed. "Equal parts daring and foolhardy, perhaps. Only once was I accused of being a Witch of the Wilds. A Chasind man traveling with a caravan of merchants. He pointed and gasped, and began shouting in his strange language. Most assumed he was casting a curse of some kind on me." She smirked. "I played the terrified girl, and naturally he was arrested."

"Quick thinking," Trinne muttered, not sure whether to be impressed or perturbed.

"Men are always willing to believe two things about a woman. First, that she is weak, and second, that she finds him attractive. I played the damsel and batted my lashes at the captain of the guard. Child's play," Morrigan snorted. "Still, there was much about human lands that puzzles me. Such as all the touching. So much touching for a simple greeting."

"What, you mean like a handshake?" Trinne looked askance at her companion.

"To begin with, yes," the witch scowled. "What is the point of touching my hand? I find it an offensive intrusion. This and countless other things vex me still. When last I returned to the Wilds, I swore to Flemeth I would never leave again."

Trinne laughed a little at that. "And yet here you are."

"Yes. Here I am," Morrigan repeated quietly, with a small sigh. "Well, let us continue on, before the earth opens and swallows us, shall we?"

"Suit yourself," the Circle mage shrugged, catching the hint Morrigan was done talking, for now, at least.

>>>X<<<

They did manage to make a fair bit more progress before reaching a spot Alistair--with Morrigan's reluctant agreement--deemed fitting to set up camp. Still, when Trinne asked him once more how long to Lake Calenhad, desperately hoping the estimate had changed, the warrior gave an apologetic smile as he confirmed it hadn't.

"Why're you in such a hurry to get there, anyway?" he asked idly, leaning his sword and shield against a rock to help with setting up camp.

Trinne mentally chewed herself out for being too eager as she shrugged and offered a teasing grin. "Just miss home sweet home."
Alistair eyes her skeptically. "You sure? Because earlier you were making it sound like this was going to be a quick visit. Like you wanted it to be over with." He raised an eyebrow. "Are you hiding something from us?"

The mage rolled her eyes. "What, are you some sort of expert on hiding things from people?"

He opened his mouth to retort, shut it again, shook his head slightly. "You're just being really touchy. Makes a man curious," he drawled.

"Oh, go away," Trinne huffed in exasperation, cracking a smile as she swatted his shoulder. "Go bother Leliana or Sten or somebody."

"Hey, you're the one who asked a question," he reminded her playfully. "Not my fault you're acting suspicious." He waggled his eyebrows.

She actually laughed at that. "Oh, so I'm suspicious now, am I?"

"Yes. Horribly," Alistair deadpanned. "I feel an overwhelming need to keep an eye on you..."

Trinne shook her head, chuckling as she pushed a bundle of canvas and pegs into his hands. "Go set up a tent, pretty boy. Or you're the one who gets to sleep with the mabari outside tonight."

The warrior offered a mock salute, nearly dropping the rolled up tent in the process. "Yes ser, fearless leader, ser."

She couldn't resist grinning and rolling her eyes as she watched him walk away.

You're definitely nothing like the other templars I've met...

>>X<<

Despite his resolve to keep his head above water and keep busy with tangible goals, Harvey found nights most trying. You could easily divide the day up into a string of organized activities—finding your way through the wilderness, staying off popular routes, avoiding trouble, setting up camp or roasting a wild chewy goat hunted down in the aforementioned wilds—all throughout the day he could manage, right until the night slowed down the world again. Even as he was keeping watch, sitting with the templar by the bonfire, intrusive thoughts kept buzzing like a swarm of angry bees, leaving him in the foulest of moods.

Alistair must have been trying to get his attention for a while, because by the time Harvey looked away from the flames, the templar's face carried a hint of resignation, as if he was sorry for trying to ask anything.

The rogue tilted his head, more distracted than apologetic, but for his companion it must have looked like a sign of encouragement.

"I was asking," the warrior carefully articulated every word. "Do you know why our leader is so skittish about going back to Kinloch Hold?"

"You like her, don't you? Harvey felt a wave of irritation. It wasn't any of his business, but the fact the man managed to find something shielding him from his grief, while he himself was left to his own devices during their journey north, was finally taking its toll. He almost said it out loud.

"I wasn't at the Circle while she was being recruited, so I wouldn't know." There, a nice short answer, and an honest one. Seeing as they both were stepping on each other's toes since day one, the
mage didn't go to the trouble of sharing her story, and as a result Harvey barely knew anything about her. Plus, he was preoccupied with other things... as was she. The rogue thought if he should mention Alistair was at least the second man to whom she'd offered special attention in the last few weeks. He wasn't blind. But no, that was probably out of line... and he wanted the warrior to shut up, not question him further.

"You've said it yourself," Harvey poked burning logs with a stick, "the Wardens aren't above conscripting people of... questionable circumstances." He wished that would be enough for the warrior to drop the subject. He had other things on his mind than dwelling on origins of one Trinne Amell.

"That's...true." Alistair's impression of a kicked puppy made him regret letting out even that bit of spite. For all the, well, developing crush, as Harvey saw it, templar's thoughts apparently didn't avoid that particular path either. Irritation moved over to give shame some space. The rogue bit his tongue. And I don't even think that way, I'm just sharing my misery.

"Look," he followed up with a sigh, "or she was in the wrong place at the wrong time." I know I was. Even if she was keeping secrets, how bad could it be? Did she magic someone by accident? She definitely had a light hand when it came to throwing deadly blasts around--Harvey unconsciously rolled his shoulder--but the mage didn't seem the hardened criminal type, as annoying as she sometimes was.

"Doesn't really matter now," he finally added, trying to defuse his own words. A noble, a templar, two mages, a wanted criminal and a surely insane chantry sister, they were a traveling carnival troupe either way. All things considered, he didn't do half bad while drawing the lots for the watch roster. Amell got Sten as her 'company' during the next shift, good luck with that.

"But aren't you curious about her at all? She's clearly avoiding the subject. I really wonder what made Duncan recruit her."

It was like watching someone shoot themselves in the foot.

The mind is tricky like that, the rogue sympathized, you can try and protect yourself, direct your attention elsewhere, but it always somehow made you stab yourself again. And again. And you can't even blame anyone, because it's your head. At the mention of his mentor, Alistair sunk into himself immediately, question about the mage dropped. Mischievous smiles and pretty eyes could only protect you so far, it seemed.

Silence made the air heavy--but not awkward, to the warrior's credit, seeing as he was finally over his crying fits--and they just sat there for a while, listening to the various nighttime noises, searching for a false note in their surroundings. Even though Harvey doubted they would hear anything suspicious--Frida slept somewhere near undisturbed, and he trusted her senses more than he trusted his own.

Alistair looked just...sad, and Harvey wondered if it's how people saw him as well. Some small part of him felt like he owed the templar more compassion, a few friendly words for companionship's sake. Still, most of him felt numb about the warrior's loss, his acquaintance with Duncan short—and as much as he was grateful the man saved his life in Highever, the Warden's deed was far from an altruistic gesture.

Finally, the blond sniffed once, defeated smile crooking his lips. "Nights are the worst," he echoed Harvey's earlier thoughts.

"...yeah." the noble nodded casually.
And this could have been it, two men reaching consensus, and dropping an uncomfortable subject. But to Harvey's horror, the templar pressed on. "I'm sorry, I just wish I had more time with him," the warrior admitted, reminiscing about Duncan "...or that at least I had something to remember him by. But...you lost your family, right? I'm sorry. I remember he said...I remember hearing about it."

Harvey was horrified. Please don't do this, I'm not even trying to be nice to you, I don't deserve your concern. I don't want to talk about it.

But Alistair was clueless, or maybe he just didn't understand--after all he didn't bother hiding his grief from others, even if it earned him more than a few snarky comments from Morrigan. And at this point he shared more than enough to expect some sort of token of appreciation, a childlike notion of "you give me something, I give you something in return"... and it made Harvey feel bad about keeping quiet. It was only good manners to loose up his tongue in return.

The decision was impulsive. Maybe his common sense went to sleep--he was pretty exhausted--but keeping everything to himself wasn't helping at all so far. Trust or no trust, they fought monsters together. That had to count for at least a speck of friendship. Still, pointing at the object resting at Alistair's feet was one of the most difficult things he'd done of late, slaying darkspawn included. "I do have something to remember my parents by," he stated in a low voice.

It took a few moments for the warrior to figure out the implications. "The sword?" He inquired, eyebrows risen. "The sword you gave me at Ostagar?" He picked up the blade and inspected it carefully in the dim light.

Harvey could easily picture what he was seeing. An old blade, far more clunky than those used nowadays, but still indisputably well balanced, the laurel pattern adorning the hilt faded almost into non-existence. He knew this sword by heart. A long, long time ago he even thought he'd get to wield it one day.

Still, the sudden outburst took him by surprise.

"Are you completely out of your mind?! I can't take this!" The look on Alistair's horrified face showed understanding. "What if I lose it on the battlefield...What if it breaks? Don't you care about your heirloom?" He got up, handing the hilt back to its proper owner.

Or tried to.

Harvey's hand twitched and moved to take it, but then wavered and only pushed it farther away. "And what do you want me to do with it?!", he asked, voice rising more than he intended. "Swords are meant to be used!" He met Alistair's blank gaze and grit his teeth. Do I really need to explain this to you?! "It's too heavy for me! Unwieldy!" He spat out the word, face burning. It was a mistake; he shouldn't have said anything, and definitely shouldn't have tried to explain himself to someone he barely knew.

Alistair stood, annoyingly relentless, waiting for the rogue to change his mind.

Well, at least he didn't throw it under my feet, Harvey sighed. "Look, it's a good blade. A warrior's sword... and I am no warrior. Keep it till we find you a better one, if that makes you feel better," he compromised dryly.

"It is a good blade," Alistair admitted slowly, uncertain, but it seemed that at last he conceded the
point. He sat back down, thoughtful, glancing between Harvey and the weapon. “I won't lose it, I promise,” he said, the solemn tone earning him a strange look from the rogue. Carefully putting the blade back in its sheath, he sent Harvey a crooked smile. “And if something happens to it...I'll tell you what-” he pondered for a second- “I will let you shave my head, completely. Hairless as a knee. What do you say?”

The idea was so ridiculous, so outlandish, that Harvey couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. And then a second one. It took him a few moments to realize that the third sound that left his throat wasn't a laugh, no, and suddenly he was biting his balled fist, finally failing to keep in what was long overdue. It came crashing down on him, Highever, his parents, the fact he was never going to see them again. That the only thing he had left was a stupid, useless symbol. His eyes burned, so he covered them with his arm. He wasn't a child anymore, and crying won't fix anything, as his father would say. He allowed himself a few choked up sobs anyway.

It took Harvey a few minutes to calm down enough to speak, his companion being the only--thankfully silent--witness to his grief. “Stupid piece of metal,” he managed, his voice coarse. “This is just a stupid piece of metal.”

>>X<<

She couldn't sleep. Huffing angrily, Trinne punched her pillow and rolled over again, trying to fight through the nerves and get deeper asleep than a light doze. The low murmur of Alistair and Cousland making small talk wasn't helping, even if she didn't care what they were talking about.

Tomorrow they would reach Kinloch Hold. And she would begin praying with every fiber in her being that Greagoir didn't mention the series of events that led to her joining the Wardens. She was traveling with an ex-templar for Andraste's sake. The last thing she needed was to explain the Jowan mess to Alistair. The worst part, she knew, would be that she wasn't sorry. No matter how badly his lying to her hurt, she wasn't sorry she helped him, and she never would be--blood mage or no.

Trinne groaned and dug her fingers into her hair. This was exactly the train of thought she was trying to avoid so she could maybe get some sleep. She focused on the nighttime noises instead; crickets, frogs, Dane and Frida snoring, the murmured rise and fall of her fellow Wardens' conversation. And it worked.

Though by morning, a good part of her would be wishing it hadn't.
It was dark. And **cold**. And there was some less than subtle background noise thrumming at her temples, a discordant melody she couldn't ignore no matter how hard she tried. Trinne shivered, rubbed her arms in a futile attempt to warm up as she regained her bearings.

She was alone. That in itself was disorienting, even without it being pitch black. She summoned a spell wisp--for what little good its weak light would do--and started walking, wondering what had happened to the others. The wisp bobbed along next to her, illuminating just enough of the uneven, rocky path she could take a couple more steps. It wasn't until one of the rocky outcroppings wobbled and flickered, as if underwater, that the pieces clicked.

This was a dream. The realization did not bring the relief she expected. If anything, the aura of unseen menace increased. Wisps of glowing green fog drifted past, twisting and curling as they headed for some distant point. The song was getting louder, and she realized she'd drawn closer to the source.

With no better ideas, Trinne followed the fog. Maybe that was the point, anyway. It felt like that was where she was supposed to go. Her wisp trilled in concern as the green glow appeared ahead, and started trailing behind her. Since the green light was enough to see by now, she dismissed the spirit and continued on alone. The song was getting louder.

As she drew nearer to what was apparently the centerpoint of the dream, the thrumming in her temples increased, dread building a knot in the pit of her stomach. The song was getting louder. The jutting outcrop in the distance looked familiar--

If the downdraft of the dragon's wings hadn't knocked her down, she probably would've tripped over her own feet anyway. The archdemon landed heavily, screeching in warning, or victory, or rage, she didn't care. Even distant as it was, the mage would swear she could *feel* its breath against her face as she crab-crawled backwards, unable to tear her gaze away.

The huge head swiveled back and forth, white-marble eyes scanning the desolation of the Fade. Panting breath seized in her throat, choking out the scream building in her chest. Probably for the best, she had to concede, settling for a whimper as she shrank back.

It sniffed, took a step in her direction. Terror had lightning sizzling and crackling in her palms.

Another step. The song was deafening, in her head, it wouldn't go away.

*The dragon's head swung in her direction, jaws working as hot breath washed out.*

*She screamed.*

>>>X<<<

"Trinne. **Trinne.**" Hand on her shoulder. Concern filling hazel eyes.

"No!" She lashed out, back of one hand connecting with a *crack* against flesh and bone.

"Trinne, it's *me*!" It was as he nudged her hands down it registered *me* meant Alistair. She stopped
struggling, the hands on her shoulders comforting rather than constricting now. Breathing hard, she
rested her forehead against his chest--missing the surprise in his eyes completely--and took a moment
to banish the dragon from inside her eyelids. Replace it with images of tousled blankets and the
snapping heat of the campfire embers.

"What the sodding Void was that?!" she demanded when she finally looked up. A wince tweaked
her features at the red mark blooming along Alistair's cheekbone. "Sorry."

The warrior shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I have a very hard head. You sure you didn't break
your hand?" he joked.

Trinne wiggled her fingers, feeling a couple twinge. She shook her head anyway. "Nope. No
damage." She have to try to heal them when he wasn't looking...


She tried to glare at him but couldn't help the shaky laugh that escaped her lips. "I'm full of surprises,
templar." Pause. "Though the terror definitely helped. Bringing me back to my original question:
What. Was. That?"

He hesitated, tugging on one ear. "I'm assuming you saw the archdemon again?"

Trinne nodded wordlessly, raking one trembling hand through her hair.

More tugging at his earlobe. "How do I explain this..." Deep, sighing breath as he tried to collect his
thoughts. "Part of being a Grey Warden is being able to hear the darkspawn. That's what your dream
was. The archdemon 'talks' to the horde, and we hear it, same as they do. It's how we know this is
truly a Blight."

"Wait, so you're sayin' that wasn't a one time deal for my Joining?" Trinne tugged her knees in close
to her chest and shivered. "I'm gonna be seeing it a lot?"

Alistair nodded apologetically. "It takes some doing, but you can usually learn to block out the
dreams. Some of the older Wardens even said they could understand the archdemon a bit, but I sure
can't. Anyhow, I heard you thrashing around and thought I should tell you. It was scary at first for
me, too."

A half-smile quirked one side of her mouth. "I'm a big girl. I'll be fine. But... thanks, Alistair. I... I
appreciate it."

He grinned. "Hey, that's what I'm here for. Delivering unpleasant news and witty one-liners. Think
you'll be getting back to sleep?"

Trinne yawned wide enough to pop her jaw and glanced skyward. Pink was already teasing along
the top edges of the trees. "Not really a point, is there?"

"True. Sorry. D'you think if we start cooking, the others'll get the hint and wake up?"

She giggled, stomach rumbling at the mention of food. "Won't know 'til we try, I guess. But you do
realize living in the Circle didn't afford me much opportunity to learn to cook, right?"

"My dear lady, I'm sure I don't know what you're implying," Alistair drawled.
"Are all templars this thick? I can't cook."

"Ah, so I'll be doing all the work is what you're telling me."

She shot him a dirty look. "Pretty much. I mean, I can help, but you're in charge. Scary as that thought may be."

"Hey," he protested good-naturedly. "It's too early for you to be so mean."

Trinne rolled her eyes and laughed. "If you think that's mean, you haven't seen anything yet."

Alistair chuckled and started pulling supplies out of a knapsack. "Well, save it for later, will you? An extra pair of hands really will make this go faster."

"Very subtle," the mage grinned. "Just tell me what you need me to do."

He hesitated a minute, then nodded at the kettle sitting by the firepit. "Could you get some water and start it boiling? Porridge is about the limit of my skills when it comes to breakfast."

"Put some apples or something in it for taste, and that's fine with me," she assured him, lugging the kettle off to fill with water. She nearly dropped it on her foot when she thought she saw the archdemon in the reflective surface of the stream. The 'archdemon' turned out to be a weird-shaped tree branch and her over-active imagination, but Trinne still spent the whole walk back to camp trying to slow her heartbeat. And as she slung the full kettle on its hanger over the fire—which Alistair had coaxed back to more than embers while she was gone—the mage blurted the first question that popped into her head as a distraction, "So, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

Alistair looked up at her, brows raised in surprise. "Same way you did; you drink blood, choke on it, and pass out. You haven't forgotten already, have you?"

"Ha ha. So funny," Trinne muttered, plopping down almost-gracefully next to him.

"I do my best," the warrior grinned. "What can I say?" He sighed, blowing out a slow breath as he cut up an apple, paying far more attention to the fruit then to her. "Let's see... I was in the Chantry before. They, you know, um, trained me as a templar. That's where I learned most of my skills."

"You mentioned the templar thing," she nodded, handing him another apple as he finished with the first one. "I gotta say, now that I know you a little, you don't really seem the religious sort."

Alistair laughed ruefully. "You're telling me. I was banished to the kitchen to scrub pots more times than I can count. And that's a lot; I can count pretty high," he added hastily, forestalling Trinne's comment before she even opened her mouth.

"You're good, pretty boy," she laughed. "so, what happened?"

"There was a tournament. I didn't win, but Duncan still picked me to recruit. The grand cleric didn't want to let me go. Duncan actually had to conscript me, and was she ever furious that he did..." He laughed, faraway look in his eyes. "I swear, I thought she was going to have us arrested on the spot. I was lucky."

It was Trinne's turn to raise an eyebrow. Most templars at the tower had chosen the life and wouldn't
trade it for anything. "You think this is better than being a templar?" I knew there was a reason I liked you...

Alistair nodded. "Oh, I suppose Chantry life is good enough for some-" a glance at Leliana's tent-"but not me. This way there's less lyrium addiction, killing monsters who actually deserve to die, not to mention we're fighting the Blight and actually doing some good. Not just sitting in a temple somewhere." He sighed heavily, hands slowing. "I'll always be thankful to Duncan for recruiting me. If it hadn't been for him, you know, I would never... I wouldn't have..." His voice wobbled, and an attempt to slice into another apple missed and gouged his thumb instead.

Trinne winced apologetically and reached for the bleeding hand, curling her fingers around his thumb. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought him up."

Alistair sniffled, dropping the knife to scrub at his eyes with the other hand as the healing spell flickered. "No, it's... I shouldn't be... it's fine. He died a hero. They all did." He blinked, cleared his throat. "Can we... change the subject?"

"Sure," the mage agreed readily. "do you have a topic in mind, or am I supposed to come up with something?"

The warrior laughed shakily at her teasing tone. "I'm sure I can come up with something... You're getting better with those, by the way." He nodded toward her hand, still loosely wrapped around his thumb.

"Oh, thanks." Trinne hastily relinquished her grasp. "Wouldn't want him getting the wrong idea..."

"You know what they say, practice makes perfect. Anyway, it's not like I reattached a limb or anything. I ever do that, I expect a round of applause."

This laugh was less shaky, and completely genuine. "I'll bear that in mind. I-' Alistair frowned, neck craning toward the road. "Did you hear that?"

Trinne nodded, already climbing to her feet. "I'll check it out. You keep workin' on breakfast."

"But what if."

"Relax, Pretty Boy." Lightning crackled in her palm. "I can take care of myself, and worst case, I can scream really loud."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Alistair teased, dodging when she tried to swat the back of his head. "Go protect us, oh fearless leader."

She stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes at him as she left to see what or who was approaching the camp.

>>X<<

It turned out to be a very familiar pair of dwarves. Bodahn had apparently changed his mind about the dangers of traveling with Grey Wardens. Since he brought with him a wagonload of trade goods, and shared the fascinating tidbit that Sandal was a master of enchantment, it was an easy thing for Trinne to agree he could follow their ragtag band around.

"Protection in exchange for goods and services seemed fair to me," she explained it to the others
when they sat down to eat breakfast. No one objected to the arrangement, and Trinne was too preoccupied to care if they did. Between the lingering shadows of her nightmare and the knowledge they would reach Lake Calenhad today, she didn't really care about anything else.

>>X<<

The few hours' walk to the lake was fairly uneventful, which was almost worse than if they'd been hassled by darkspawn or bandits. This way, there was nothing to distract her from mental images of Irving’s I'm Disappointed In You face, or Greagoir scowling liking he wanted to execute her on the spot.

Stop it, Trinne, the mage scolded herself as she listened absently to Alistair badgering Sten about what he did while in the cage in Lothering. You're a Grey Warden now. They can't do anything to you. And Greagoir scowling at you is nothing new. You're Trinne Amell. When have you ever cared what the Circle powers-that-be thought about you?

Never! And I still don't. Trinne sighed, raking her fingers through her hair as she glanced at her companions. I care what they think, though. If I'm going to lead, I need them to trust me. And the potentially upcoming revelations aren't exactly the sort of thing that will inspire trust for a former templar or a Chantry lay sister, at least...

"Taking a page from your fellow Warden's book, I see," Morrigan commented as she came alongside the Circle mage, interrupting Trinne's train of thought.

"Huh?" she frowned in confusion.

"You've gone quiet as the Cousland boy," the witch elaborated.

"And? I thought you liked that about him," Trinne sniped. "Don't I ask too many questions or something?"

"Indeed. However, the last thing we need is our esteemed leader worrying herself to distraction. 'Tis how mistakes are made and accidents happen."

"So, what, you're going to distract me in a different way?" She raised an eyebrow at Morrigan.

"In conversing with me, you did seem to at least pay some attention to the road," the witch sighed. "If subjecting myself to your questioning keeps us from wandering into trouble, I feel I have no choice but to make the sacrifice."

Trinne rolled her eyes. "Gee, thanks for that. Anything in particular gonna be a safer topic of discussion?"

Morrigan shrugged. "There is no law that says I must answer everything you ask."

You'd prob'ly just ignore it if there was. "So... just ask you anything an' if you don't wanna answer you won't?"

"Precisely," the other woman nodded.

"It's as good a plan as any, I guess." Trinne was silent for a moment. "Flemeth. Is she really the Flemeth?"
Morrigan arched an eyebrow. "So she claims. Are you familiar with the story?"

"I've read the legend a dozen times since I arrived at the Circle, but but beyond that-" Trinne abruptly checked her stride as Dane danced in front of her feet, stick clenched his jaws. "Dog, I swear..." She took the stick and threw it. "No. And given how many times the legend was repeated before being written down, I'm sure it's not entirely true as I read it."

"How very... realistic of you," Morrigan commented, sounding almost surprised.

The Circle mage shrugged. "I'd had enough of my own stories get mangled or inflated beyond recognition as they made rounds through the tower t' know you can't take anything 'legendary' at face value." She glanced over at Morrigan. "How's Flemeth tell it? Not every little nuance or anything. Just the basics, if that's something you feel like talking about."

The witch snorted. "I do not mind, but it is curious you ask about a legend rather than poking farther about me."

"After you were so prickly last time?" Trinne shot back. "I have enough to worry about without adding concern you'll do me in for being too nosy."

Morrigan actually laughed. "An excellent point. So, now, even the simple version of my mother's tale is an intriguing one..."

>>X<<

Morrigan was right; even the short version of the story was interesting enough to keep Trinne's mind off her impending problems until they reached Lake Calenhad. The mix of emotions she felt as they topped the hill and the tower came into view defied description. This was home, or had been, until not too terribly long ago.

Behind her, Alistair whistled as he took in the intimidating silhouette—and the murky lake water that effectively cut it off from the rest of the world. "Any particular reason the mages built the tower in the middle of a lake? They have an aversion to practicality or something?" he joked.

Trinne shook her head, too nervous to even chuckle at the question. "The mages didn't build it. The Avarr did, with help from the dwarves. Templars drove them out, then Calenhad drove them out, and when the Denerim Circle was razed a couple ages ago, the Chantry decided to relocate to here." She nodded at the crumbling remnants of a vast stone bridge. "I s'ppose an old fortress in the middle of a lake appealed to them because it makes it harder for us to escape." She twisted a lock of hair around her finger, absently wondering how Jowan had managed it. "Also makes it a blasted pain to get to, though, so let's go see what we can do about passage across the lake." She could feel his questioning gaze on her back as she made her way down the hill, but Trinne refused to look back. If she looked at him, he'd ask what was wrong. And she was really dreading getting into that. *Nothing much, Alistair. The Knight-Commander just hates my guts because I helped my best friend—who turned out to be a blood mage—destroy his phylactery and escape. So now there's a 'dangerous' blood mage on the loose and the templars have no way of tracking him and it's my fault. Never mind that Jowan wouldn't hurt a fly without provocation, he's evil now and so am I by association. Only reason I'm not dead or locked up is 'cause Duncan decided loyalty and friendship count for something.*

But she kept her mouth shut and headed for the docks. *Wait a minute...* The mage squinted as they
drew closer to the rough wooden planking. *That's not the regular ferryman.* Instead of the genial, older man who usually transported people across to the tower, a templar stood at the end of the docks. Arms crossed, face set in a disgruntled almost-frown, his presence was not a good sign. *Ugh, Maker, I did not need a snag like this.* But there was nothing to be done at this point but keep walking.

"Hey, you! I hope you weren't plannin' on goin' to the tower. Because I have strict orders not to let anyone past," the templar--Car-something; she couldn't remember his name-- informed her as her feet hit wood.

**Andraste's bloody knickerweasels.** "How come?" Trinne demanded, mentally informing the Maker the reason better be damn good.

His eyes narrowed. "That information's need to know, and I see no reason you need to know."

**Trinne, do not strangle the templar. Don't do it.** Clenching her hands into fists, she matched his unimpressed stare. "I need to get across to speak to the mages. I'm a Grey Warden and we need their assistance."

"A Grey Warden, huh?" he scoffed. "Prove it."

Teeth grinding together and sparks sizzling around the roots of her hair, Trinne dug around in Alistair's knapsack until she found the Grey Warden treaty with the mages. "Here. I have this."

"Mmm, yes, well, I have some documents, too," the templar rejoined. "They say I'm the queen of Antiva. What do you have to say to that?"

**That you must be really, really bored to consider this entertainment.** "Aren't queens usually, y'know female?" she pointed out sarcastically.

He waved her off. "Don't question royalty. Anyway, it was nice break chatting, but off you go, shoo, leave."

"Wait, no, we really do need to get across to the tower to speak with the mages," Trinne protested, crossing her arms and glaring at the templar--Carroll! *That's his name. I think*--as she kept a tight grip on the treaty. "Isn't there any way we can work out a deal of some kind?"

Carroll paused for a moment, deep in thought, and then nodded toward Morrigan, who had been doing an admirable job hiding in Sten's shadow up til now. "That... dark-eyed temptress in the back. Surely the tower would be far too dull for her? Because it... gets a little lonely out here, and you could just... leave her with me."

Rather than protest, or lob a scathing insult at the templar, Morrigan just stepped forward and smiled—a dangerous smile, one that reminded Trinne of the tower's mouser stalking a rat. "Ah, excellent. I have been hoping for new prey for some time now."

All the color drained from Carroll's face. "P-Prey?"

"'Twill take but a moment," the witch continued as if he hadn't spoken, sizing him up with a cutting glance. "Perhaps you should go aboard and prepare the vessel whilst we are away, Warden. We shall have to row ourselves across." She batted her eyelashes at the templar. "I fear the lad will no longer have the use of his limbs, or indeed his eyes, once I am done with him."
He shifted nervously. "Ah, maybe I should--"

"Oh, wonderful!" Morrigan smirked. "I can sense his terror! That will make the loving all the sweeter."

Carroll coughed into a gauntleted fist. "So, you said you wanted to go across, maybeweshouldgonow. Right now."

Fighting back a laugh, Trinne gave Morrigan a grateful nod. "Sounds like a plan. Cousland, Alistair, c'mon. We might be all the Wardens left in Ferelden, but we can at least try to make this look official." Badly as she didn't want Alistair to know about That Series of Events, she hated the thought--unlikely as it was--of Greagoir laughing in her face and sending her away empty-handed just for spite if she went alone. Both men looked more than a little surprised at her admonition, but dutifully climbed in the small boat. "The rest of you can wait at the inn, I guess." Trinne tossed her coin purse to Leliana. "Don't go too crazy; we don't have much."

"Of course," the redhead nodded.

Dane and Frida both whined as the templar loosened the rope that bound the boat to the dock and cast off.

"Go with Leliana," the mage instructed, pointing. Dane folded back his ears, but obeyed, Frida--miraculously--trailing not far behind him.

Satisfied that the dogs would stay with Leliana--at least, hers would--Trinne turned back around and sat properly, swallowing hard as they drifted ever closer to the cold, looming stone of the tower. Nothing she could do now but wait to get there, and hope it wouldn't be as bad as she feared.
As the small boat slid across the surface of the lake, Trinne stared at the approaching tower and gnawed her bottom lip in thought. She had an additional something to worry about, beyond Greagoir and Irving's reactions to seeing her again. Travel to the tower was never cut off. Never. Not once in the entire time she'd lived there had they refused to let people in. *Out*, obviously, was restricted and monitored closely, but *in* had never been hard. For that to be the case now, something had to be very, very wrong.

Which was not a pleasant thought when it concerned your home.

None of them really spoke on the boat ride; she was too nervous, and Alistair and Cousland both seemed to not have any idea what to say. They finally docked, Carroll held the boat still while they got out, and then he left. And there was nowhere to go but forward.

>>X<<

*Chaos* was the only word that came to mind to describe the scene that greeted them as they entered the tower; memories washing over Trinne as she passed through the doorway.

"*No, I won't let you touch her!*"

"*Stay away from me, blood mage!*"

With a shake of her head, the mage wrenched herself back to the present and looked around for Greagoir. The mess of templars crowded in the room made that difficult, but she *did* find him—smack in the middle, giving orders and drumming his fingers against the hilt of his sword anxiously.

"*Knight-Commander!*” Gesturing for her fellow Wardens to follow her, Trinne beelined for the man.

Greagoir's head swung in their direction and he scowled. "Of course *you* would come back now. I gave Carroll strict instructions—"

"I'm here as a Grey Warden," Trinne interrupted what was shaping into a rant. "Nothing more, nothing less. We came to ask the mages to fulfill the treaty they made to aid against the Blight."

He groaned, rubbing his forehead. "Damn the Grey Wardens and their ceaseless need for men... As you can see, the mages are in no position to fulfill the treaty."

"I *can* see," she nodded, surveying the templars who filled the entrance hall. Guarded, wary, some injured and all clearly tired. "What in the name of Andraste's pyre happened?!"

Greagoir sighed, still trying to massage away his headache. "The tower is no longer under our control," he informed her bluntly. "The halls are filled with abominations and demons." He shook his head. "We were too complacent... First Jowan, now this..." Steely eyes narrowed as he glared at her. "Don't think for one *second* I've forgotten your part in his escape."

"Oh, Maker forbid," Trinne shot back sarcastically, inwardly wincing as Alistair suddenly looked much more interested in the conversation. Cousland, thankfully, was distracted by the wounded templars huddled in the corner. "And don't *you* think for one second that I regret my choice. Few
things in life make me happier than knowing my friend got away from you."

_Shut up, Trinne._ **SHUT UP,** an inner voice screamed, flashing panic at Alistair's further increased interest and the scowl on Greagoir's face. _Change the subject, idiot. Back to now and off Jowan before Pretty Boy gets curious enough to ask questions._

She was pretty sure it was too late for that, but keeping Greagoir from rupturing an artery was an equally good reason. "Him escaping seems like small potatoes compared to this."

"True enough," the knight-commander agreed.

"What happened? And where's Irving?" Trinne demanded, the First Enchanter's absence glaring the moment it dawned on her.

"We don't know, and we don't know," came the grim reply. "All any of us saw were demons, hunting without discrimination between mage or templar. I ordered a retreat, and we pulled out and barred the doors. I have sent word to Denerim, calling for reinforcements and the Right of Annulment."

His almost defeated sounding statement snapped lightning down her spine. "You can't! What- What if there are people still alive in there, _innocent_ people?!" She thought of Leorah, Petra, Niall... all the apprentices, _children._ "They can't all be dead!"

"And what would you have me _do,_ girl?" Greagoir snapped back. "It is too painful, not to mention _dangerous,_ to hope for survivors and find naught but death and demons. I'll not risk my men on a fool's errand."

"We'll do it," Trinne blurted in desperation, refusing to accept that everything, every_one_ that made this place home for more than a decade was just _gone._ Behind her Alistair flinched, and Cousland actually started paying attention to the conversation. She had a sinking feeling she'd bitten off more than she could chew—again—but was too stubborn to let it go. "Mages aren't exactly defenseless," she pointed out. "Some might still be alive."

The knight-commander frowned. "And what of the abominations? They are a force to be reckoned with, and you will surely face more than one."

"Please, this is _me_ we're talkin' about," Trinne scoffed, with bravado she didn't _entirely_ feel. "I can handle myself. An' these two aren't bad, either. We've survived an ogre, I think we can handle some abominations."

"Trinne..." Alistair mumbled, nudging her arm at the exaggeration.

She waved him off. Okay, _so technically_ they had only survived that encounter because a woman straight out of legend rescued them. She tried not to think about the image of Cousland, broken and dying on the tower floor, the sting of helplessness, followed swiftly by the sting of genlock arrows. "We can do this, Greagoir."

He sighed. "Fine. If you insist. Your deaths will be on your own heads, though. And I won't accept the tower is safe unless I hear it from Irving himself, are we clear? Until I hear _his voice,_ those doors stay closed. And if he is dead, then the tower is lost and we will enact the Rite of Annulment."

That was a lot to hang on one man's survival, but she didn't really have a choice. "Deal."
Trinne started to walk away, but Greagoir grabbed her arm. "Remember, Amell, once we close those
doors behind you, we will not open them again until I hear Irving's guarantee it's safe."

She shook loose. "I heard you the first time, Knight-Commander, ser. We have a deal. Now, if you'll
excuse me, we have abominations to slaughter and a First Enchanter to rescue."

And with that, she walked away. She would have marched straight up to the imposing spiked doors
and demanded to be let through at once if Cousland hadn't cleared his throat and pointed out that
they should probably stock up on supplies before venturing in, under the circumstances.

Despite her hurry, Trinne had to admit he was right. So they stopped by the nervous, jittery
quartermaster first, before approaching the trio of templars who guarded the doors.

"We're ready. Let us through," Trinne requested, foot bouncing with impatience.

One of the three grunted and moved to open the doors.

"Funny," Alistair muttered under his breath as the doors creaked open. "Locking things up and
throwing away the key was always plan B..."

"My sides are splitting," Trinne snarked, not in the mood for jokes sprung from impending doom
hanging over her home.

Alistair must've caught on to that fact because he sent her an apologetic smile as they stepped
through the doorway and into the tower. "Nice touch with the ogre bit, by the way."

The mage shrugged. "I have a bit of a... 'big talker' reputation around here. Half the templars are
convinced I talk a better game than I play. I had to throw in something to make him agree. This is my
home, Alistair! I can't just stand by and let them enact the Right of Annulment without tryin' to help
first!"

The door boomed shut behind them, underscoring her words.

"Um..." Cousland cleared his throat. "What is the Right of Annulment?"

"It's only used in extreme cases," Alistair explained. "If a Circle is corrupted beyond hope of rescue,
the Right gives the templars permission to cleanse the fallen Circle-"

"To kill everyone," Trinne clarified angrily, face white as she surveyed the carnage filling the hall
before them. "From the First Enchanter down through the freshest-arrived apprentices, every. Single.
One. Like I said, I can't just stand by and let them enact the Right of Annulment without tryin' to help
first!"

The warrior pointed out. "What if it's too far gone and we can't help?"

Trinne shook her head. "I can't even think about that. I can't." She almost savagely yanked open the
door to the first block of dormitories. Her room. Jowan's room. She pushed the thought away like the
pesky irritant it was, fighting the urge to scream, cry, throw up--maybe all three--at the state of the
room. Bloodstained walls and floor, broken beds, smashed chests, piles of.... she didn't want to know
what heaped against the walls. She stood staring at the mess for a minute, frozen like a statue, before
moving instinctively toward the bunks that had been hers and Jowan's. One of the bedposts was
splintered, the other three doing their best to support the top bunk. Trinne paid no heed to the
precarious arrangement and plopped down on the lower bunk, making the whole thing sway.

"Um, that might not be the best idea..." Alistair muttered, shoulders tensing.

She ignored him, feeling around between the support slats and the mattress until she found the folded parchment. The black cord and its three-bead pendant were still safe inside. The mage allowed a sigh of relief to escape her lips as she gingerly rose from the bed.

"What?" Alistair frowned in confusion.

"Something my sister made me," Trinne replied shortly, tucking the parchment-wrapped bauble in her belt pouch. "Before my magic showed up."

"I didn't know you had a sister," the warrior blurted, watching her scan the room.

"Yeah, well, I do," she shot back, tone blunt. "Two, actually, that I know of." Thirteen years gone, Mum likely had at least one more kid. She absently kicked the base of the bed. It creaked and shifted, revealing a low wooden chest. A thought occurred to her as she stared at the battered lid, a deep, clumsy 'J' carved in the corner. I bet it's still there... Shame to just leave it...

She sat back down on the lower bunk and pulled the chest into her lap to dig through the contents, fingers clenched against the carving on the lid.

"Do we really have time-"

"This will just take a second," Trinne interrupted Cousland's protest, not even looking up as she dug through everything that had been important to her best friend. True to her word, it didn't take long to find what she sought, even though it was buried underneath everything else. She flipped through the leatherbound book to ensure she had the right thing, then tucked it in her pack and stood. "Alright, let's get going."

"What was that?" Alistair pressed as they exited the ruined dormitory.

"Nothing important," Trinne brushed him off. "And nothing bad, just... a personal memento."

He was smart enough to recognize an off limits topic when he heard one, and let the matter drop.

Unfortunately, what he chose as a new topic was just as bad. Maybe worse. "So, this Jowan the Knight-Commander mentioned..."

No. Maker, no, please, not this, not now. This is better discussed later.

"...what's the story there?"

Sod. She hesitated, decided she was justified, and replied, "Short version? He's my best friend, the Templars were going to make him Tranquil, and I helped him escape. Greagoir--obviously--hasn't forgiven me yet."

"You helped your friend become an apostate?!" He stared at her like she'd flipped off the Divine, helping to further justify her in what she hadn't shared. "Why would you--"

"Did you not hear the word Tranquil leave my mouth?!" Trinne cut him off angrily. "Tran-quiet. Cut off from the Fade, along with all the wonderful side effects. He and I would both rather be dead"
than Tranquil, so forgive me if I'm not exactly sorry he avoided that fate!

The warrior looked briefly taken aback before—wisely—letting it drop with a simple, "So that's why... Duncan had to recruit you? 'Cause of that?"

"Yes." She didn't want to fight about it anymore than he did, so she let it go. Part of her was slightly worried about the conversation they'd be having if Alistair ever learned the details she’d left out, like the blood magic. And the Chantry initiate now languishing in Aeonar. But mostly the blood magic.

However, that was a concern for later. When she she wasn't leading the way through a charnel house that used to be her home. *Is this what it felt like for Cousland?* the mage wondered briefly as every face she recognized twisted the knots in her stomach tighter.

If so, she felt a good bit more empathy for the rogue, coupled with amazement he hadn't broken down completely.

*Maybe he did,* her subconscious prompted as she searched the second dormitory in vain for survivors. *Not everyone reacts with hysterics like you would, remember.*

She had to concede that point, and pushed the whole matter out of her mind as she reached for the door to the library foyer. The sounds of combat filtered through the stone door as she hauled it open, and she saw Alistair and Cousland reach for their weapons.

They weren't necessary. The white-haired senior enchanter standing between a rage demon and the terrified huddle of children summoned a spell that turned the demon to ice sculpture before she shattered it with a blow from her staff.

"Wynne?!!"

The only thing more surprising than seeing the healer again so soon was that Cousland seemed to recognize her, too.
Don't Look

The two mages stared at each other for a shocked second before both demanded, "What are you doing back here?"

Wynne raised an eyebrow at the younger woman's surprise. "Is it really so difficult to believe I would return to my home?"

"No, but that was fast," Trinne muttered.

Wynne chuckled. "Don't sound so surprised, dear."

"Is your arm doing better, dear?" Wynne repeated.

"Oh. Yes, thank you."

Trinne frowned briefly, wondering how the two of them could possibly have met, before remembering the Kocari Wilds Incident and how grumpy Cousland had been that she'd almost hit him. Maybe you actually did some damage...

But Wynne was smiling warmly and murmuring how glad she was to hear it before returning to the matter at hand. "You still haven't told me what you're doing here, Trinne. Weren't you planning to never set foot in the Circle again?"

"I was informed by the Knight-Commander that the Circle was indisposed?" Wynne finished for her, smiling thinly. "They may have abandoned us to our fate, but we are not all so helpless."

"Ya don't hafta tell me twice," Trinne snorted. "Hasn't stopped Greagoir from sending for the Right of Annulment."

"So they mean to..." Wynne's voice trailed off and she instinctively moved to place herself between the children and the door. "I will not see innocents pay for Uldred's crimes."

Trinne scowled at the reminder. "The Maker has a twisted sense of humor. And plans change. We're it as far as Grey Wardens go, so we came to get the mages' help against the Blight."

"And were informed by the Knight-Commander that the Circle was indisposed?" Wynne finished for her, smiling thinly. "They may have abandoned us to our fate, but we are not all so helpless."

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Uldred? I'm sensing a story there... Trinne raised an eyebrow. "The Right hasn't arrived yet, so I talked him into lettin' us try an' fix things. Save anyone still alive." She glanced toward the children and the pair of older apprentices with them.

"Good then." Wynne shifted her grip on her staff, expression determined. "Let me come with you. I can dispel the barrier I put in place-" she gestured toward the shimmering shield that blocked the doorway to the library- "and I imagine more help would be appreciated?"

Trinne bristled at the older woman's tone, but Alistair hastily spoke up. "Yes, thanks. Can never have too much help."

Tamping down her irritation, Trinne raked one hand through her hair. "Where's Irving? Greagoir
said he won't unbar the door unless he hears from Irving that it's safe."

"I haven't seen him in some time," Wynne frowned. "Not since he told me to look after the children. It seems that would be our path then; find Irving and get him out safely."

"Will... Will they be safe here?" Cousland spoke up, gaze still glued on the children.

"Of course, dear," Wynne said reassuringly. "Petra and Kinnon will look after them, and I assume nothing dangerous will make it past us?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Trinne muttered. "'Mon, we're wasting time."

"Wynne, are you sure about this?" Petra spoke up. "You were so badly hurt earlier. Maybe I should go instead?"

"No, I'll be fine, dear. Don't fret," Wynne promised.

"Yeah, we can do this. Nothin' to worry about," Trinne added.

"Refreshing as your confidence is, do not let it blind you to your weaknesses," Wynne cautioned, causing Trinne to roll her eyes.

"That's what you're for," she replied, voice dripping no small amount of sarcasm. "To keep me from gettin' too full of myself. Now like I said, we're wastin' time, let's go!"

Not looking entirely happy with Trinne's attitude, Wynne turned to face the barrier and dispelled it with a wave of her hand. "Be on your guard, Wardens."

Almost immediately, they ran into a trio of abominations. It took every ounce of willpower Trinne possessed to not try and figure out who they'd been before becoming monsters. She could feel the bile climbing her throat as one by one, the things that had been mages, had been people she knew, fell to blades and magic.

Once the fight was over, adrenaline fading but not gone, never gone while these things filled her home, the state of the library actually registered, and Trinne had to clamp a hand over her mouth to keep from losing what little she'd had to eat that morning.

Shattered bookshelves had disgorged their contents in piles on the bloody floor, ruined tomes heaped around and over corpses in various stages of dismemberment. Despite her best efforts, a pained cry escaped her lips at the utter destruction of her favorite place in the whole blasted tower. As Trinne stood frozen, eyes scanning the bodies and ruined books even as her brain screamed Stop, this is a mistake, her gaze swept over the still form of a pale, redheaded elf girl, eyes fixed and staring at nothing over wounds too horrible to register.

"I hear the Surana girl has a crush on you."

He rolled his eyes, face going red, and focused intently on his book. "Yeah, right."

"No, seriously. She's cute. We can always find out for sure," she retorted impishly, preparing to flag
down the elf in question.

"Trinne, don't you dare!"

>>X<<

And now the cute, shy little redhead who used to peek at Jowan over the top of her books was dead, torn apart and discarded like refuse in the remains of the gutted library. One final gut-punch reminder that things would never be the same. It didn't improve her mood. Which was probably why she whipped around with a snapped "What?!" when someone touched her shoulder.

Alistair snatched his hand back as if she'd tried to bite him. "I, um, I know this has to be hard for you, but we need to keep moving."

"Right, of course. Save the day now, puke my guts up later," she muttered sarcastically, deliberately not looking at the bodies littering the room as she pressed forward.

There were more demons to fight, both literal and figurative, as they made their way through the rest of the library. Memories assaulted her with almost the same ferocity as the spirits of rage they encountered. By the time they were mounting the stairs to the next floor, Trinne was already unsure how much more of this she could take.

>>X<<

The second floor proved quieter than the previous one – but it was a creepy kind of quiet, it sucked out all the relief from the prospect of catching a breath.

"It's cold in here." Alistair shivered, and Harvey had to agree, there was just something in the air, it felt like stepping on your own grave.

The vast atrium they entered via a staircase was empty, save for the piles of rubble scattered around, and—the rogue noticed with a start, because he missed him at first—a lone man who was seemingly trying to make sense of the mess. The older, balding male glanced in their direction, but wasn't overly surprised or alarmed by their presence. More like troubled.

"Please refrain from going into the stockroom," he stated formally. "It's a mess and I have not been able to get it into a state fit to be seen." Then, perhaps deciding that his business with the newcomers was finished, proceeded his search between the pieces of fallen debris. He fished out a bloodied scroll, or at least a piece of one, as far as the rogue could tell, examined it briefly, and then disappeared inside the alcove to their right.

"Owain..." Wynne followed after the man with almost motherly scorn.

The rest of the group exchanged glances—Harvey searching for confirmation he wasn't the only one who found the encounter...odd. Alistair replied with an uncomfortable shrug and muttered something the rogue couldn't hear. Trinne... he either imagined it, or her scowl deepened even more.

Once again Harvey felt as if some crucial piece of information passed over his head. He sighed. Mages and their mage... things. Even the would-be templar was in the know. The rogue just hoped they'd found an ally in this insanity.

They quickly joined the quiet conversation inside the stockroom. The peculiar chill was still present even here, but thanks to a few strategically placed candles, the room gave an aura of cosyness, if not warmth.
"I was trying to tidy up, but there was little I could do," the man apologized in words, if not in tone.

*You're not wrong.* The rogue looked around, noting exactly what he expected to find. They wouldn't be able to stock up here. The place has been heavily looted, going by the state of shelves and crates. Most of them were empty, some even didn't survive the whole ordeal and lay in pieces between broken flasks and papers. He shuddered. It took some force to do that. He tried to picture what the shelves housed before they were cleared out, but he lacked the imagination. Amell on the other hand knew exactly what it had to be, because she gently stepped over what looked like a charred corpse—while doing her best to avoid gazing at it—and started rummaging through the rubble scattered around her on the floor.

Alistair asked if she needed any help, but the mage barked she was fine.

Well, then. She'd been on edge from the moment they entered the tower, and that was understandable. Harvey felt a pang of sympathy.

Wynne and the man called Owain were talking in hushed voices, and leaning his back against the wall, Harvey focused his attention there. A lone clerk looking after an empty room, the rogue wasn't sure why it unsettled him so. He appeared helpful enough, answering questions without a stutter, and Harvey doubted he'd be a better judge of character than Wynne, who called this place her home... But what was the point of him, really—of anyone being here, right in the open...when you could choose not to be? His eyes were drawn to the man's hands even as he was droning through his story. There was something wrong with the way he held his hands.

"I tried to leave when things got quiet, that is when I encountered the barrier," the balding man said, describing Wynne's creation. "Finding no way out, I returned to work."

"Owain, you should have said something, I would have opened the door for you," the older mage tsked and shook her head.

It was his demeanor that was off, Harvey realized—completely relaxed, as if the happenings in the Circle were someone else's problem. But he was aware of what was going on, he just admitted it! The rogue tensed, confused by receiving obviously mixed signals—was this a deception?

"The stockroom is familiar, I prefer to be here," Owain carried on.

Harvey felt the hair on his neck stand at attention. The man was either insane, or shocked out of his wit, or worst of all was lying, and Wynne was behaving as if she didn't notice a thing.

"Is he... alright?" he probed, trying to convince himself he was just being paranoid.

"Well, he doesn't seem to be hurt, are you, Owain?" The older mage fussed, and when the man answered with a 'no', she turned around and caught the rogue's perplexed expression. She understood. "I see you have doubts, young man. He's exactly as he appears, believe it or not. Owain here is a Tranquil, they do not have emotions. But there is nothing wrong with him, do not worry."

"Hmph, one could say that's *exactly* what's wrong with him." The thought might have been initially intended to be spoken under her breath. But it didn't come out that way. It came out like a lightning bolt aimed at your face, and from the look of it Amell wasn't in the mood to take it back.

"Trinne Amell!"

"What, you're afraid he'll take offense?!" She kicked a piece of a broken bottle, and it shattered into a thousand little pieces. Her next words were venom. "Oh wait, guess what!" She gasped in mock-surprise. "No he won't! To do that you need to be able to get angry! Or have pride or something.
And that's *waaay* beyond a Tranquil, believe me."

"This is not a reason for you to disrespect him, when he's serving the Circle the best way he can!" Wynne was appalled.

"As if he had a choice!"

"They usually do."

Harvey got lost after that. Different contexts from two differing points of view on concepts he had no idea about. But it definitely explained why the usually forward leader decided to sit the whole encounter out. Corpses beat those so called Tranquils then, good to know. But this...this was getting out of hand.

"Look," he cut in, getting both womens' attention. "This isn't important now-" The statement earned him a scorching look from the black haired mage- "I just wanted to know if he can be trusted. What I'm trying to say, let's not draw too much attention to ourselves, alright?" he paused. "We are outnumbered as it is."

As on cue Alistair peaked his head outside the alcove, to check if they hadn't disturbed anything nasty. After a painfully long moment he gave them a sign the coast was clear. The luck smiled on them again.

"Fine, FINE." Trinne admitted. "*But,*" she turned to Wynne. "I'm not disrespecting him, I just can't understand how anyone can say that *this* is alright!" she fumed.

The older mage did the wise thing and simply responded. "This is not a discussion for now."

This whole time, the exhibit A of the ongoing argument was watching the debate with unchanging passiveness. "I would prefer not to die," he said finally. "I would prefer it if the Tower returned to the way it was. Perhaps Niall will succeed and save us all."

*He definitely did not take any offense.* Harvey eyed him in wonder.

"Niall?" The two mages echoed, obviously recognizing the name. Harvey was only thankful it was Alistair who asked the following question. He was afraid of starting the next great war.

"Who's Niall?"

"Niall is an enchanter, he came here with several others and took the Litany of Andralla," Owain explained.

"A nice guy," Trinne added. "A little dry with the facts, though. Litany of Andralla... That kind of rings a bell."

"That protects from mind domination!" Wynne paled. "Is blood magic at work here?"

"I do not know," the Tranquil said.

The old mage covered her lips with a palm, deep in thought. Harvey understood that as bad as things were, right now they might have gotten a whole lot worse. "Niall was in the meeting. He would know. Blood magic. I was afraid of this," she sighed. "Thank you Owain, this is important."

The Tranquil simply nodded.
"We should find Niall, the Litany will give us a fighting chance against any blood mages we encounter."

And it was good to know there was someone out there fighting on their side. They definitely could use some help, Harvey thought.

They said their goodbyes, Owain once again refusing to move to a safer spot downstairs, even though Wynne promised him Petra and other mages would protect him. It didn't change his mind.

Harvey and Amell were the last ones to leave the alcove.

"This is still not right." The young mage glanced one last time in the direction of the Tranquil, who was picking up work where he left off.

"You mean leaving him here?"

"That too." She bit her lip, before looking at him, anger still present in her eyes. "But he should know better! He should try to save his own life. Care about it more, at least. Not stay here sorting out trash like it's Tuesday."

"I'm just... really trying to keep up with all of this." Harvey shook his head, a roundabout way of admitting he wasn't sure what to think. But if she put it that way, he couldn't disagree.
Reluctant as she may have been to leave Owain defenseless, there really wasn't any choice. They had to keep moving if they were going to find Irving. Besides, the same principle applied as with the children; nothing could hurt him if nothing got past them. But that was small comfort in the face of their odds.

"There's nothing here!" All of them froze at the voice, human and desperate, that issued from one of the side rooms.

"There has to be!" That voice Trinne recognized. Damarys, or something like that. "Uldred said-"

"Uldred said a lot of things," a third person cut her off. "And now he's abandoned us in favor of whatever he's doing upstairs."

Trinne started listening more intently. Maybe they could find out what Uldred was up to, if Irving was still alive- Alistair sneezed. He tried to muffle it as best he could, she could tell, but there wasn't really any background noise to cover it.

"Who's there?" three voices demanded in chorus, underlined by the crackle of magic.

"No one special," Trinne shot back, stepping brazenly into the room, ignoring Alistair and Cousland's dismay at the reckless move.

"Then no one will miss you," one of the men countered, his staff flaring as he started to cast a spell.

"Actually, I've gotten kinda used to having her around," Alistair said, stepping into view as well. Trinne couldn't help but notice he strode far enough into the room he was between her and the trio of mages in the brief instant before they attacked.

Alistair somewhat easily deflected the opening salvo with his shield, lunging forward as Trinne waved one hand. A hazy, weakening miasma settled over their foes, making their response times slower when lightning spidered from Trinne's staff and Alistair and Cousland moved in for the kill. They made quick work of the two men--robes didn't provide protection against blades--but Damarys kept dodging, backing away until she was pressed against the wall. She stood there, back arched in a defensive stance as magic flared and flashed around her hands.

"Stay away!" she demanded, eyes darting between the advancing group. "I'll take all of you with me, I swear it!" One hand brushed over a small gash on her arm, and for the briefest moment her magic tinted red.

Trinne felt a knot settle in her stomach. This wasn't going to end well.

"Stay back!" Damarys insisted, voice distorting slightly. "Don't make me hurt you!"

Alistair's expression flattened, as if concentrating very hard on something, and the magic faded some.

"Templar bastard!" she screamed, upon realizing what he had done. Without another word, she
renewed the spell's power and aimed it at Alistair as she unleashed it. At exactly the same moment Trinne summoned a lightning spell aimed at her. The two magical attacks collided midway and exploded, throwing all five of them to the ground.

Trinne scrambled to her feet, vaguely aware of Cousland standing as well, and stepped lightly on Damarys' wrist as the prone mage rolled over and rubbed her forehead. "Don't even think about tryin' anything. I am so not in the mood."

Damarys winced and held up her hand pleadingly. "No, please, please, don't kill me."

"Why not? You were trying to kill us," Trinne snapped back, feeling the start of several aches. "I know I don't deserve mercy. We... we were just trying to make things better."

Trinne snorted, tossing a glance over her shoulder as Cousland helped Alistair to his feet. "Better? You really think this is sodding better?!

"You used to lived here," Damarys retorted, almost angrily. "You know what it's like... Can you really blame us for trying?"

No. She couldn't. The results were awful and reprehensible, but with her feelings about templars, she couldn't blame them for trying. "But is it worth this?" A gesture at the destruction around them.

"Nothing is worth what they've done to this place," Wynne said frostily as she and the others stepped up behind Trinne.

"Do you really believe that, Wynne?" Damarys asked quietly. "After all, change rarely comes peacefully. Andraste waged war on the Imperium. She didn't settle for writing them a strongly worded letter. We... we thought... someone has to take the first step. Force change. No matter what the consequences."

"Nothing is worth what you have done to this place," Wynne repeated, arms crossed and a stony glare fixed on the young woman. "And why should we spare you? What would you do with your life? More blood magic?"

"Yeah, we really shouldn't leave a blood mage alive," Alistair muttered. "But this is your home, so I'll leave this call up to the two of you..."

Trinne glanced at Cousland, but he just shrugged, apparently sharing Alistair's sentiment. She turned back to Damarys. "I'm also curious what you would do if we let you go."

"I... I could go to the Chantry," she faltered. "Spend my life atoning for my... crimes."

"'Y'know, they'll never take you," Alistair drawled. "Harlots or murderers, sure, fine. Have some cheese, maybe something to drink. But maleficarum?" He shook his head. "No way."

None of them argued his assessment because they knew it was true. Trinne stared at the girl lying before them, dependent on their mercy, and tried to figure out what to do. Tweak the circumstances slightly, and that could be her--survivor of a failed rebellion, hoping for mercy, a whisper away from death.
Tweak things even less and it could be Jowan.

Trinne swore under her breath. "I'm not going to help you escape. But we won't kill you, either." When Damarys' eyes widened in surprise, she shrugged. "Like you said, I used to live here. We had classes together. This... isn't you." You woulda said that about Jowan, too. "So you get a second chance. If you blow it, I'm not gonna save you, or stop the templars or anything. It's on you to do better."

"Really?!" Damarys scrambled to her feet. "Thank you! I won't waste this chance, I swear!"

"The templars aren't letting anyone out yet," Trinne warned, raking hair out of her face. "But the apprentice dorm are clear--or were--so you can wait there 'til we find Irving."

Damarys' eye twitched. "Irving? Uldred took him up. I don't know how far, or why, but I don't think it was for anything good. Be careful."

"As we can," Trinne said softly. "Now get going."

"I hope you don't regret that," Wynne murmured as Damarys retreated down the stairs.

"Everyone deserves a second chance," Trinne replied. "If they screw that up I get a little less merciful."

"Everyone?" Wynne raised an eyebrow.

"Anyone who's repentant and wants to make it right," Trinne clarified. "Some people don't think they're wrong, and there isn't really anything to be done about that. But don't we have more important things to do?"

"Yes, of course," the older mage nodded. "These sorts of discussions can wait. The longer we delay, the greater the danger to Irving."

As they searched the room for anything useful, Alistair sidled up to Trinne and asked in an undertone, "Did you really know her?"

She sighed as she wedged a couple scrolls in her pack. "Alistair, I lived here for over a decade. Of course I knew her. It's not like we were best friends or anything, but we sometimes would share notes on primal magic, she would snicker at my jokes in Sweeney's lectures, and her bunk was in the same dormitory as mine. Is it really that hard to believe I knew her?"

He shrugged, shifting through debris and handing her the small vials of lyrium he found. "It's just hard to picture you knowing a blood mage. They're bad and scary and they hurt people."

"They teach you that in templar training?" Trinne asked caustically, irreverently jamming the lyrium vials in a belt pouch. "They're people, Alistair. Yes, some--most, even--may have selfish motives and be bad people, but some are just scared and desperate and have no idea how far in over their heads they're getting. Damarys was always a good person. Void, her brother's a templar. Blood mages aren't all nasty, guffawing villains who just want to watch the world burn because no one ever loved them."

Alistair raised an eyebrow at her impassioned outburst. "Next you're gonna tell me you're a blood mage."
"No, I never went _that_ far," Trinne said as she stood up, convinced they'd found everything worth saving. "The entropy spells; weakness an' all that are the closest I get. C'mon, we need to get moving."

He frowned at the abrupt end to their conversation but didn't protest. Cousland and Wynne were already waiting by the door to the tower hallway. But that was only part of her motivation for cutting things short. She was getting perilously close to saying Things she didn't want Alistair knowing, especially now, seeing that he'd hung on to just enough of that templar training to butt heads.

>>X<<

The rest of the floor proved to be more of what they'd already seen and fought; abominations, walking corpses--decayed past recognition, thankfully--the occasional blood mage. Every room, every death set the knot in her stomach and the icy claws around her heart a little tighter. Trinne was a fairly optimistic person most of the time, but the rampant carnage was chipping away at her hopes of finding the First Enchanter. No. No. He's powerful, and the leader. Whatever Uldred's doing he probably has Irving with him an' is keeping, him alive 'til the end, if only to gloat. Uldred always had issues with pride; gloating was absolutely something he'd do.

Her self-pep talk was interrupted by a muffled _thump_ from inside a wardrobe tucked in the corner of the room they'd just cleared.

All four of them swiveled toward the sound, Alistair half-drawing his freshly sheathed sword.

"Wait, wait." Wynne held up a calming hand and addressed the wardrobe. "Is there someone in there? It's safe to come out now."

There was something that sounded very much like a whimper, followed by, "B-But the demons..."

"They are all dead," the Senior Enchanter promised, tone gentle. "Please come out of there, friend."

"Well..." he hesitated. "If you're sure it's safe..."

"Quite," Wynne promised, and the wardrobe doors inched open, disgorging a pale, gangly man in the yellow robes of a Harrowed mage.

He winced and rubbed the back of his neck as he surveyed them. "Well, it's--ah!--very nice to meet you--ow. Nice to meet anyone who's still alive, if I'm honest."

"Are you alright?" Trinne asked, frowning in concern.

"Ah, just a crick in my neck and a numb bottom from sitting in there for so long," he shrugged. "Nothing serious. Who're you?"

"Trinne, Amell," she tacked on, and watched the recognition flash through his eyes(not the good kind, either, the 'weren't-you-best-friends-with-a-blood-mage' kind). "And who're you?"

"Godwin." He didn't seem the least bit surprised she didn't recognize him.

"What were you _doing_ in there?" Alistair queried, still looking slightly guarded.
"Hiding," Godwin retorted. "I didn't see the start of it, just abominations in the hall, and decided getting out of sight and being very, very quiet was the best course of action."

"Good thinking," Cousland muttered, and for once Trinne agreed with him. She was all for doing something and facing your fears, but one mage against multiple abominations wouldn't be bravery, it would be stupidity.

"We've killed everything behind us," she offered. "You could go down to the apprentice quarters. There are some others we've... rescued down there. You'd be safe."

"In a roomful of potential abominations?" Godwin shook his head. "No, thank you. I'll stick with my closet."

"Suit yourself," Trinne shrugged. They had enough to worry about, and he was capable of making his own choices. If he wanted to be paranoid and hide here instead of joining the other mages, it was his call. "Come on, there's still a couple more levels to search."

Godwin climbed back in his closet as they filed out of the room, and Trinne couldn't help hoping he was making the right call.
She was getting really tired of fighting abominations. Honestly, she was getting tired of fighting, period, but fighting monsters that had once been people she'd known added a layer of emotional exhaustion to a physically exhausting circumstance.

"Alright, we need a break," Trinne said as their group reached the top of another flight of stairs. They were now one level below the Harrowing chamber, and it had been a hard fight to get this far. Just the room at the bottom had held four or five abomination and several shades. She had an awful headache from how far she'd drained her mana reserves fighting them off. And if the white-knuckle grasp Wynne had on her staff was any indication, she wasn't doing much better. This room looked safe as any for them to take a few minutes to gather themselves. "Alistair, why don't you and Cousland scout ahead a bit? See... see if you can find any survivors."

"But you just said we need a break," Alistair protested.

"I was thinkin' more Wynne an' me, y'know, to get our mana back, but if you guys are tired you can rest for a few minutes, too," she conceded grumpily. Delaying could mean death for some poor trapped mage. She and Wynne had to take a break if they wanted to be any good in the next fight, but all of them stopping was probably a bad idea.

"No, no, that's okay. I was just confused..." Alistair sighed and shook his head "C'mon, Harvey."

Part of her wanted to apologize, explain she was worried--scared sick, really--by the state of her home and rationality wasn't a strong suit right now. But that part lost to the one insisting she didn't owe him anything; he was practically a templar, and instead watched the men as they started quietly down the hall.

"You're too hard on him," Wynne said quietly.

"How was that too hard on him?" Trinne protested. You shoulda heard me at Ostagar... or in the Wilds...

"Warriors need rest as well; there are limits to what the human body can do. You didn't need to bite his head off over a simple misunderstanding."

"I didn't-" Trinne stopped herself, growled in frustration and raked one hand through her hair. "Never mind."

Wynne looked like she wanted to say more, but kept whatever opinion was bubbling up to herself.

The two of them sat in silence for a long moment before Trinne couldn't stand the waiting tension any longer. "So, what exactly happened to make things... like this?"

>>X<<

There was a... wrongness in the air that Alistair hadn't noticed until he and Harvey moved away from the mages. And this was a different sense of wrong than the lower levels, and different from the usual slight warping magic caused for mage and templar senses. Something was off about this floor, something was very, very wrong. He just couldn't put his finger on it. It obviously wasn't coming
from the open spaces; he could see clearly that there was nothing but refuse and stone there. Which meant it had to be coming from one of the rooms currently hidden behind closed doors.

"Something doesn't feel right, I think we should be extra careful," he whispered to Harvey. "My templar sense are tingling, I guess Trinne would say."

They both flicked an instinctive glance back at the mages, who were deep in animated conversation as they rested.

>>>X<<<

Wynne sighed, her gaze drifting slowly over the blood stained floor and viscera-smeared walls. "I stayed to help the few survivors of Ostagar. Just a day or two at the camp made to shelter the wounded, patch them up enough they could keep moving." Her expression hardened. "It wasn't much of a delay, but it was enough for Uldred to get back here before me. By the time I made it back here, he had all but convinced the Circle to support Loghain."

"What??" Trinne had never liked Uldred; he always seem to hold himself apart, like he thought he was better than the rest of them. But supporting a murdering usurper was a stretch even for him. "How the bloody Void did he talk them into that?"

"How do you think?" Wynne said, tone just shy of scornful. "He praised Loghain's status as a war hero and now regent, said if we supported him he would tell the Chantry to give mages more freedoms... He dangled a tantalizing hope of autonomy in front of them and conveniently left off what Loghain had done at Ostagar. I can't really blame the Circle for listening; he had a persuasive argument-"

"But Ostagar!" Trinne protested.

"They had no way of knowing about that," Wynne reminded her. "News seldom reaches us here before it's already months old, so if Uldred didn't tell them, they couldn't have known."

She had to concede that point. "Okay, then what happened next?"

"I went to Irving," Wynne said, voice brimming over with righteous anger. "I told him exactly what that traitorous bastard did at Ostagar. He was... perturbed. He promised to make things right." Her tone softened. "The next day, he called a meeting to confront Uldred."

>>>X<<<

Harvey nodded in response to Alistair's warning, and the two of them were extra quiet approaching the first door. The rogue stepped closer cautiously, running one hand over the heavy, carven wood of the door, zeroing in on the keyhole. Probably planning to listen before opening it, Alistair guessed. Which is why he was flabbergasted when Harvey listened for a moment, pulled back to stare at the door, then pushed it open and walked into the room bold as brass.

"No, Harvey, what-" Alistair scrambled after him. *Maker, let the room be-

"Well, well," a soft, feminine voice purred. "What have we here?"

- empty.
Trinne glanced at their surroundings. "I take it that didn't go well?"

Wynne shook her head. "I can't say, exactly. I wasn't in the meeting. I had just come out of my rooms when I heard the screams."

For a moment, he couldn't really do anything but stare at the purple-skinned figure in the center of the room. *Naked. She's... practically naked.* Unbidden, the teaching of various Chantry sisters came flooding back. *That's a desire demon,* he surmised, blushing to the roots of his hair as his brain fully registered to nearly nude form; perfect figure, dazzling eyes, horns, tail... She was every bit as beautiful and formidable as the Sister had made her kind sound.

Alistair's salvation came by way of the other individual in the room—a templar, craggy features suggesting he was just entering middle age. "What is the matter, my darling?" he asked, voice thick, as if half-asleep.

"It's nothing, pet," the demon purred. "Just visitors. Why don't you go read to the children while I see what they want?"

"Of course, dear," the templar nodded, and fell silent.

"Now..." the demon turned to glare at Alistair. "What do you want, *templar*?"

Wynne's eyes filled with pain as she remembered. "They... the screams were coming from the meeting room. It was on my way there I saw the first abomination."

"Oh, me?" Alistair squared his shoulders, glancing over at Harvey. The rogue was just standing there, looking very interested in what the demon had to say. Alistair bit back a groan as he realized whatever charm the demon was using had somehow affected the other man. *So, no back-up if this goes south. Maker, help me.* "Well, we were just looking around when we stumbled into your lovely nest-er, home. How's your, um, how's he?" He motioned at the templar.

The demon smiled. "He has everything he ever wanted, as do I. We're *both* doing wonderfully."

There was a threatening undertone to the words that made him even more uncomfortable with the fact he was *conversing with a demon.*

"And what benefit do you get out of giving him everything he ever wanted?" Alistair asked, cautiously. He didn't want to provoke her, not yet, not with his odds.

"Sustenance, of course," she chuckled, running her fingers almost affectionately through the templar's hair. "With everything I'm giving him, it seems only fair I get something in return. But I assure you, he's quite happy."

"Oh, well, if he's *happy,* I completely understand," Alistair muttered sarcastically.
"I don't know what Uldred did," Wynne sighed, gesturing around them. "But this, the state of things now, is his doing."

He needed to get the mages in here. But he didn't want to risk her getting away or attacking while he was without help. *Let this work*, he begged mentally before plastering on a smile and tugging on Harvey's arm. "Well, we should really be going..."

"But we just got here," Harvey protested, voice thick with dreaming as he shook free. "It'd be rude to leave so early..."

"Well, then," Alistair glanced between the rogue, the demon, and the doorway. This was a complication. But he really didn't like his chances without the mages. "You keep visiting. I have some other friends who would love to meet our... host." He moved toward the door, well aware of the huge gamble he was making. He could only pray it paid off. Hopefully, not arguing or trying to get his friend back would make her think he didn't want a fight and she'd let him leave. Hopefully, she wouldn't get her claws, charm, whatever, even deeper into Harvey. Hopefully, she wouldn't leave with her prizes as he was talking to the mages. It was a lot of hopefullys, but he couldn't fight her by himself.

He let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding as he made it out the door with no resistance and walked quickly as he dared toward where the mages were resting.

"That's all you know?" Trinne couldn't help the disappointed note in her voice. It was remarkably little information.

"If we find Niall, he might be able to sate your curiosity," Wynne said dryly. "He was in the meeting, so he would have seen-" She broke off abruptly at the rapid approach of footsteps. "Alistair? Is something wrong dear?"

"And where's Cousland?" Trinne frowned.

"We have a problem," Alistair sighed. "There's a desire demon in the one room we were scouting. She'd ensorcelled a templar, and sorta... snagged Harvey, too. Obviously we have to do something about it, but I know how powerful her kind is, so I figured it was better to have help."

"What, no confidence in your skills as a templar, Pretty Boy?" Trinne needled, pushing to her feet.

"Oh, plenty, just not as much as you have in yours as a mage," he shot back, and despite the grimness of their situation she couldn't help but smirk. "I prefer to err on the side of not getting myself killed."

"Point," she grinned, before sobering somewhat. "Let's go save Cousland and this templar from the big scary desire demon." Hopefully her tone was light enough to hide her trepidation at fighting something as powerful as a desire demon when they were down a person.

"Trinne, you really should be taking this more seriously," Wynne murmured disapprovingly.
Apparently it was.

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Nothing had changed when they re-entered the room. The demon, the templar, and Harvey were all standing exactly where he had left them. Alistair wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Maybe both.

Before he could figure out what to say, Trinne gasped and stepped past him, thunderclouds in her eyes, and glared at the demon. "Let him... let them go."

The demon just laughed at her demand. "When they're both so happy? What kind of monster to you think I am?" She gave a taunting smile, running a caressing hand down the templar's face. "He finally has the family he always wanted, the family the templars denied him. Why would you take that from him?"

He couldn't see her face with where she was standing, but the way Trinne's shoulders were shaking couldn't be a good sign. "Let. Him. Go," she repeated, and Alistair would've sworn he saw lightning spark in her hair.

"Our bond is too strong," the demon informed her with sickly sweet tones. "He's mine now, by choice."

Alistair noticed too late the spell building in Trinne's hand. "Trinne, wait-"

But she'd already summoned a handful of lightning, and even as he formed the protest, she sent it flying toward the demon with a wordless cry of rage.

The templar gave a cry of his own and lunged forward to block the lightning bolt. The demon shrieked angrily, summoning the corpses that littered the room to fight for her as she swept forward.

"Would've been nice to get Harvey back first," Alistair couldn't resist snarking as he drew his sword.

"Well, then, kill the sodding demon!" Trinne snapped back, clocking an encroaching corpse with her staff. "Isn't that what templars do?"

"Watch out!" Wynne cried in warning as she unleashed a torrent of cold magic toward their enemies.

Alistair and Trinne dodged to opposite sides--Trinne almost bumping into Harvey--until the spell finished. He decided to take the mage's advice and go after the demon. Maybe if he killed her quickly enough, she would be the only thing they had to kill. The corpses wouldn't be walking, and her charm wouldn't be holding the templar and Harvey any more.

Without a word of planning, the mages shifted to handling crowd control and protecting the still-charmed rogue. As he closed in on the demon, Alistair heard them calling strategy back and forth, the shattering of a frozen corpse, and what sounded like Trinne begging, "Don't make me do this." But he didn't let his attention waver from the shrieking, dodging demon as she threw every trick in her book at him. Everything from hexes and charms to a burst of cold similar to what Wynne had done moments earlier. He barely got his shield in time to block the latter; feeling the agonizing cold as it sank through the metal and into his arm.

Behind him, Alistair heard Trinne swear--she sounded almost like she was crying--and the clatter of
metal against stone that he guiltily hoped signified the templar's end. When the demon screamed in
rage, he figured he was right. She lashed out at him, her claws raking across his face when he
couldn't get his shield up in time.

"That's alright, I can get another," she snarled as she dodged around him, heading for where Trinne
and Wynne were fighting off the remnants of the undead, standing in a loose guard position between
the corpses and Harvey.

By the time Alistair recovered from the blow, she had a decent head start. "Trinne!"

The mage's head snapped around, and her features hardened at the sight of the demon. With an
obviously concentrated effort, she created a head-sized lump of rock and flung it at the demon. It was
rushed enough her aim was off, and the rock smacked into the demon's shoulder rather than
anywhere more important. But it did the job.

As the demon reeled, Alistair caught up, rammed her with his shield to further stun her, and ran her
through. She gave a choked grunt, sagged against the blade, and collapsed as Alistair pulled it back
out. Satisfied she was truly dead, he moved to helped with finishing off the remaining few undead.
He was scraping the last one off his sword when Harvey shook his head and blinked, like a man
waking from a nap.

"What..." he blinked again, looking around the room. "...happened?"

"You completely missed a good fight, that's what happened," Trinne retorted, but her tone was far
less biting than Alistair would have expected. When he turned to look, she was staring at the dead
templar, jaw set and eyes bright, like she was trying not cry, oblivious to the blood running down her
arm.

"You alright?" he asked, resting a hand on her uninjured shoulder.

"Yeah, um... yeah," she nodded and sniffled, shying away from the sympathetic touch. "I just... I
knew him. He was the templar who-who brought Jowan to the tower. He was always nice to us, let
us sneak sweets from dinner, didn't rat us out when we hid to avoid the more boring lectures. He
seemed to enjoy our mischief, at least the really harmless stuff. I think..." Her voice caught, and she
took a breath to steady herself before she continued. "I think we were like the children he couldn't
have. He was good with the other apprentices, too; comforting the younger ones when they were
scared and all, but I-I always felt like we were special, somehow."

"I'm sorry." It sounded trite and hollow. "What was his name?"

"Um," Trinne cleared her throat, blinking back tears. "Drass." She looked ready to say more, but
instead just shook her head. "We... we should keep moving. An' we should probably stick together
now, in case anyone-" her gaze flicked to Harvey- "gets in trouble again."

"It's not his fault," Alistair said in an undertone. "He didn't know there was a demon in here, and
besides, it's not like it's easy to resist a demon's charms."

"Harrowed mages do it all the time!" Trinne hissed back. "I can do it, you managed to do it."

"I have templar training, as you're so fond of reminding me. And I knew what I was walking into-"

"You don't have to do that," Harvey cut him off. "I don't need you defending me."
"Really?" Trinne interjected sarcastically. "'Cause that wasn't true a minute ago."

Alistair watched a muscle twitch in Harvey's jaw and vainly wished he was somewhere less dangerous. Fighting an ogre maybe.

"I'm terribly sorry for inconveniencing you by falling prey to a demon's wiles," the rogue drawled, tone all false politeness that was almost as cutting as Trinne's blunt sarcasm. "I'll be sure not to let it happen again, now that I know what to watch out for."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Trinne bristled.

"Just that a warning when you sent us off to scout might've been nice."

"Yeah, sure, 'cause I knew she was in here," the mage muttered sarcastically. "Whaddya think I am, all-knowing?"

"You're smart, right?" Harvey shot back, and Alistair started mentally calculating the odds they'd try to kill each other in the next few seconds. "Mages know more about demons and all this than us boring normal people. A word of caution would have been appreciated, 's all I'm saying."

Trinne's eyes narrowed and she looked ready to fire back something absolutely scathing, but she huffed out an angry breath through her nose and spun on one heel to face Alistair instead. "Hold still." She reached up and pressed a hand against the gashes trickling blood down his cheek to heal them.

Her touch was far from gentle, but Alistair still felt his face heating. "Um, thanks."

"You're welcome." Very deliberately not looking down at Drass' body, she turned toward the door. "Since we're done here, let's keep moving."

Wynne murmured agreement, Harvey grunted assent as well--even if his eyes said the mage maybe deserved whatever happened to her for charging ahead blindly--and the three of them trailed after their fearless leader.

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The other side room proved to be a disappointed, once they got inside. The door was locked and trapped both, which Cousland took care of faster than she'd expected. So you are good for something. She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying it. It was too far, and not true and wouldn't help things in the slightest. So instead she pushed open the door, bracing to be attacked by someone; something. But all they found were a few dead mages, a few dead templars, and the gutted corpse of an abomination.

As she relaxed, Alistair tugged Cousland's arm, pulling the rogue back into the hallway and muttering something about wanting to talk to him.

Trinne absently nodded, not really caring, and transfixed by the sight spread before her--all of the mages and two of the templars she'd known by name. "This has to end..."

"What, dear?" Wynne swung toward her, having only half-heard the whispered comment.
"Nothing." She shook her head. "We should see if there's anything worth taking and then keep moving. I wanna be done with this..."

They checked over the corpses, poked around in the storage chests, and came up with a few things. A couple more lyrium potions, which Trinne and Wynne split between them, and a set of mage robes, which got packed away for later. They were sized more for a man than a woman, and would require some careful tailoring if they were going to be useful. There were a few more knick knacks, but nothing important. With their examination of the room complete, the mages rejoined Alistair and Cousland in the hallway. Nowhere to go now but up. To find Irving and Uldred and finish this.

"Trinne?" Alistair stopped her with a hesitant hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"As I can be," she replied, since his tone made it clear yes was a lie. "Like I said earlier; this was my home. Seeing... this-" she gestured vaguely at the surrounding destruction and carnage- "is awful. Imagine if monsters attacked your home. Would you be okay?"

"No," he admitted--far more easily than she'd expected, rubbing the back of his neck. "I wouldn't."

"I just wanna keep things from getting worse," she muttered, kicking a piece of wood that had broken off from a crate. "If Greagoir actually uses the Right of Annulment..." she let out a shaking breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. "No. I... I don't wanna think about that. Let's just keep going. I'll be much more okay once we've finished."

"Sure." Alistair nodded. "At least there isn't too much further to go, right?"

"Right," Trinne nodded, managing a smile as she reached for the handle of the door leading to the central chamber and stairs. Not too much further...
Warm light poured through the crack in the door to give the room a cozy yellow tint, and the echo of a minstrel's song dammed only by the occasional eruption of laughter and familiar voices imposed a happy rhythm onto his fingers. His family and the guests were having fun, and the atmosphere felt quite contagious. As little as Harvey cared for parties, his mother took pride in her preparations, and if it mattered to her, that was a good enough reason for it to matter to him.

A particularly loud gale of laughter followed by a few shouts caused him to cock a curious ear -- it sounded like Fergus had had enough ale at this point, and should probably slow down soon. Harvey smirked slightly at the thought. Oriana would see to it that he did. There was something genuinely scary in how an otherwise delicate woman could be when she put her foot down. Or was it simply Fergus not wanting to deal with a seething wife in the aftermath? The rogue shook his head and turned back to fixing up his shirt. *The joys of marriage, I suppose.* The short pause was distracting enough for the two ribbons adorning the upper part of the garment to fall away untied, yet again.

"You've got to be kidding me." Harvey cursed halfheartedly, his hand reaching to comb through his hair, before he remembered he shouldn't make a mess of it. How annoying. But there might be a silver lining to this embarrassment - the story of how he got held up by a shirt would earn him a few laughs if nothing else. There was no rush. He wasn't a guest of honor or anything, just showing his face would be enough for the celebration. What he liked the most were the quiet moments of getting ready, a deep breath before plunging into a crowd of people. Prolonging it felt nice.

*Over, under, pull it tight, Make a bow, Pull it through to do it right.*

The rhyme danced in his head as well as silky strings at his fingertips, and the cloth twisted and turned, starting to make sense only to present him with another knot or two. The huge silver mirror in front of him proved to be of no help, surprisingly -- watching the reflection's hands move swiftly only confused Harvey even further. Like a game he used to play as a child, he remembered suddenly -- all children played it at one point or another -- the goal of it was to catch your reflection red-handed, spot it doing something it wasn't supposed to do. He never did... Oh, he lied about it for sure, other children liked to boast, and he couldn't have had been worse.

That was the one time Nan got so worked up when she found out, she didn't even bother with the willow rod. In a child's memory, the old bony hand smacking against his sore backside stung even worse than a wooden branch. Strange happenings and tales of shadows in the mirror were the mages' curse, and a noble boy should know better than to spout such nonsense, Andraste bless us all, there is no magic in this family and there never will be.

*Over, under, pull it tight, Make a bow, Pull it through to do it right.*

The strings untangled...

"Do you need any help with that?"
The rogue flinched, surprise stiffening his shoulders, and let go of the fabric. But the voice was a familiar one, and even before he could give it a name, the only reminder of the sudden spook left was the downright displeased expression of his reflection. Harvey turned it into a polite smile as best he could.

"I didn't hear you come in." The tone was supposed to carry the slightest note of accusation, what came out instead could make a herd of spooked critters proud. Crimson warmed the young noble's cheeks. *Really, even after all these years.*

"I thought you might need assistance," his father responded.

The crimson became even more intense as Harvey's hands grabbed the dangling strings in defiance. Was he really taking so long, that the man of the castle in person had to come and get him? A guard with a word to make haste would have sufficed in this situation.

"I-I'm finishing up." He hated himself for the stutter. Really, all he wanted was a few more moments of peace and quiet, was that so much to ask? "With all the guests, I'm sure you have other things to attend to." As he said it, the candles in the room flickered in the draft, in agreement. *Just leave.*

"Not at the moment." It was the way he said it. It tugged on the tiniest part of his soul, where all children knew they should listen to their parents. Harvey took a breath.

He'd glanced in the older man's direction before, in passing -- as not to be rude-- but now Harvey took the time to turn away from the mirror. Bryce Cousland was standing in the middle of the room, left hand at his side, the right one slightly extended in an encouraging gesture. The festive armor might have been overdoing it, but there was a crooked smile on his face, the kind that brought out the crow's feet around the eyes, and not a shadow of the expected scorn was found in his features. His father's presence was eclipsing, even in the dim candlelight. Like he was the only thing of importance in the whole room. Harvey couldn't look away, the most peculiar bump in his throat.

*Your father is trying.* It's what Mother said, over and over.  

"Ah...alright," the rogue hesitated. It was confusing, his father's...smile was confusing. *What am I doing?* As much as he'd love to prove he could take care of himself, there was no use in being stubborn. Didn't he bury the brat a long time ago? *I was...over this.* Just months...years ago. The passage of time suddenly became too slippery to grasp.

"Sorry, I just don't feel like myself today," he admitted slowly, trying to shake away the cobwebs in his head. He was certain just a moment ago, now not so much. Maybe he really could use some help after all... Harvey nodded awkwardly and accepted the invitation. The first two steps were the hardest, but it got easier the closer he got to his father, finally meeting the older Cousland in the middle of the room.

He straightened his back while the older man's hands tugged on the shirt, letting his mind wander. Not knowing where to put his eyes, they lingered on his father's armor and the greenish-purple reflections dancing on the well polished surface. Then he glanced towards the door, the crack just about as wide as it was before. The music was still there, but it seemed muted.

"You are doing well, all things considered," his father broke the silence.

That put him right back on alert. Harvey's eyes darted right up, matching his father's. To achieve this feat he had to look a few inches above the eye level. Up, always up. He took more after his mother
and bitterly gave up on that final growth spurt.

Bryce Cousland was being sincere, as far as he could tell. He held the gaze for the few seconds needed for confirmation before again wandering away into safety. Harvey tugged on one of the sleeves. This was getting weird. "I reckon you don't mean the shirt?"

"I do not." There was warmth in his father's tone.

The young noble wracked his brain in search of anything he might have done lately to make his father proud. Nothing came to mind. On the other hand, there was nothing that would leave him overly disappointed, a fine balance that brought Harvey the least amount of attention. The way he preferred it.

"But," Bryce Cousland changed the subject, "it's a fine shirt. I don't remember you wearing it before."

"This?" Harvey gestured towards his clothes. "It's Antivan...it was a gift from Oriana." It came out more like an excuse, not an emphasis on the shirt's quality. He couldn't help it, his sister in law presented him with this particular garment a few years ago, and he had a sneaking suspicion the original owner was supposed to be Fergus. But as his brother grew more barrel-chested in that period, the measurements the seamstress received no longer applied after a few months. As for Harvey, it proved mostly loose, but he could pull it off as a tunic with a help of a belt. It wouldn't be his first choice. Or second for that matter. The thing had...frills. Laced with golden thread.

Harvey's mouth babbled, eased by the more trivial subject. "I put it on the bottom of a chest and forgot about it. Or pretended to forget about it," he admitted, not feeling particularly apologetic. There will be no judgment on this particular issue. A complete lack of appreciation for frivolities ran deep in the blood of Fereldan men, and the Cousland family was no exception.

"The next time I took it out," the words came out in a rush now, like a dirty secret shared by a ten year old. "It turned out the moths ate it. Not much left of it."

The world held its breath as the memory surfaced, not quite sure how to fit together with the rest of the pieces. For Harvey, he vividly remembered the strange mixture of shame and relief as he recalled flames licking the ornate fabric. He burned what was left of the shirt on one of his hikes around the Coastlands, just a stupid kid disposing of evidence. Oriana asked him once about the gift, and he told her he couldn't find it. Lying should have not have been that easy.

So he couldn't be standing here wearing it, because it got ruined, and...it was ruined. *I avoided that mountain pass for two seasons after that. As if someone were to jump out of the bushes to call me a little lying shit.*

As if someone removed blinds form his eyes, it hit him. All of this, all of it was wrong.

Harvey was standing alone in the dark chamber, the crack in the door suddenly a gateway to darkness. The voices and music had gone away, as had his father. Where was his father?

"He died." Harvey swallowed bile that suddenly rose in his throat, he had to say it out loud or else he'd go mad. The rogue's hand reached out for the empty space where the older Cousland was standing only a few moments ago, catching air. *This is insane...*

Memories returned like links in a chain: Highever, The Grey Wardens, Lothering, and then...the Circle Tower, one tragedy after the next. They were supposed to recruit mages to their cause and
found out the place needed their help instead. Or was that also a figment of his imagination... it sounded like a tale passed around in a tavern, one that granted you more drinks, and not necessarily much credit.

But he was already pacing around the room, soaking up the details. Trying to remember. Yes, there were other people with him, they reached Kinloch Hold and were making their way through the tower. They encountered a monster on the third floor—a demon? Harvey remembered the strongest compulsion to fall asleep. There was a thud of several bodies hitting the stone pavement. This he was sure of.

What the hell was wrong with this place --the room looked like his, but in the barest sense of the word. The layout was spot on, but like they say, devil lies in the details. Like walls for example, he could count all the stones making up the walls if he tried, right up until the point they reached the corners, where they melded into one grey mass -- as if the architect wasn't sure how they connected in reality. On a hunch, Harvey covered the short distance between him and the bed and pulled on the sheets -- they were stuck in place, for show only.

"How are you supposed to sleep, then?" he asked no one in particular.

Hysterical laughter--which barely registered as his own--filled the room, but he was already inspecting the bookcase, the piece of furniture that shouldn't be here in the first place. All books in the castle belonged in the library, and old Aldous would rather go completely bald than let them out of his sight, where he could take care of them properly. Harvey didn't recognize any of the titles, but he guessed *Arcane Theory vol. I* and *Basics of Entropy* belonged in the Circle Tower, where in some weird sense he still resided. And also—the rogue crouched down to confirm his suspicion—the bookcase itself was crooked, floating a few inches above ground.

"You messed it up!" he shouted, livid. If that... thing was going to try and mess with his mind, it could at least do it *right*.

He pulled at the old tomes, wanting to see them scatter on the floor, deny this mockery. They gave him no such satisfaction. Stuck in place like the sheets on the bed, they could very well have been carved from the shelves themselves.

This was too much, the room was spinning and Harvey couldn't breathe. Fake, it was all fake. Panicking, he reached for the doorknob and swung open the door leading towards the hall. And halted.

He was standing at the edge of darkness, one step forward and he'd fall into nothing. A few heartbeats passed. Harvey slowly, gingerly closed the door, it obliged with a quiet creak. He leaned his forehead against the wooden surface, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Enough.* He had to get out of here.

But maybe not through the door.

This was a prison cell...designed not to *look* like a prison cell, it dawned on him. Who needs bars and locks if the prisoner didn't want to leave. Or if they didn't realize they even should leave. He could've been fumbling with that damn shirt for Maker knows how long and it never occurred to him to question it. *How long have I been here?* And if this was a prison, where was his jailer? Father's serene smile flashed through his mind, and the rogue clenched his teeth, trying not to think about it.

*Scratch. Scratch.*

The rogue tensed. *No more, please. I've had enough.*
The sound was coming from behind him. Harvey swallowed hard and spun around, dreading the noise that could have been in other circumstances made by a rodent. Knowing that it won't be. Illuminated in the grey glow of a window—another inconsistency—was the free standing mirror, as tall as he was, bound in a dark wooden frame. The same one he'd been standing in front of enthralled just a couple of minutes ago. The rogue couldn't quite make all of it from this angle, so he took a step toward it. And then another.

His reflection greeted him. And one could say it was to be expected, he was gazing at the surface, and his reflection should be doing the same. Only it wasn't doing so at all, it was standing as he was when he was first trying to fix up the shirt. His look-alike was scratching at the surface, his face contorted by hatred, he looked more like a creature than a man. Like a thin spider trying to get out of a glass jar, and succeeding. One of its hands found a foothold, fingers reaching beyond the surface, right into the room where the rogue was. It caught his eyes and it sent him a bloodthirsty, inhuman grin.

Harvey was yelling as he grabbed at the mirror, he kept yelling as he dragged it towards the door and pushed it into the gaping darkness. He was still yelling as he ran the other direction, towards the window, and hauled himself through it, the thought of checking where it led dismissed. Anything was better than this room.

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He felt his body fall, movement accompanied by a deafening whoosh of wind in his ears. He didn't bother counting after he reached ten. It's too long, I've been falling for too long. I'm dead. Eyes closed, he braced for impact, long forgotten snippets of the Chant racing through his mind, "when hope has abandoned me, I still see the stars...I cannot see the path, perhaps there is only the abyss...". It will hurt, but hopefully not for too long. If this is how my life ends, it's... disappointing. I never did anything. I never wanted to do anything. But somehow, in this moment, he regretted.

The awaited impact never came. One moment Harvey was falling, the next one ground was pushing uncomfortably against his shoulder blades. The rogue waited for what seemed like ages before he carefully flexed his hands, then feet, certain the agony was just around the corner. Nothing, no pain. Only then did he dare to open his eyes. A little blurry, they focused on a lone figure in robes leaning over him.

A split second and Harvey was back on his feet, familiar daggers in hands, heart racing. He was wearing armor again. He backed away until he reached a ten foot distance between himself and the newcomer. The other man made no move, friendly or otherwise.

"Who are you...." the rogue trailed off. He world spun.

Islands cruised lazily on the sickly green sky. Some were the size of rocks sprinkling the Coastland shore, a few the size of mountains, they filled the vast space right to the horizon, unconcerned by gravity. Some of them were close enough the rogue could make out the outline of structures of some sort, others were too far to discern any details. The landscape was jagged and barren... And in the middle of it all, there was an Island. There was a City. And he knew what it was, he'd read about it. He mindlessly parroted verses about it in the family chapel in the Cousland Castle. Skin me alive, there is actually some truth in the Chant.

Harvey gaped at the spectacle, daggers in hands hanging loosely on both of his sides, forgotten. "I really should've taken the door."

A few painfully long moments passed before the newcomer brought him back to reality. "You're not,
you're not one of the demons inhabiting this place..."

Harvey was shaking his head before the man finished the sentence. He turned towards the stranger, daggers still at the ready. "Are you?" The view in the distance, he didn't want to think about it. The man before him... was at least comprehensible. He looked human, as much as it was worth here.

The stranger shook his head as well, thoughtful. "You're the same as me, I suppose. Locked away in this place." He was a mage, or at least he looked like one, with dark hair and a plain face Harvey wouldn't remember if he saw it in a crowd. The man relaxed a bit as he spoke, a survivor finding his kin.

Harvey mirrored the gesture as a small concession, his shoulders slumping slightly, but he wasn't sheathing his weapons-- and visibly let it show he wasn't planning to yet. Fool me once...

"Are we dead, then?" He asked, only half-stalling. He felt the ground beneath his feet, he was talking... and yet... with the Black City hovering in the distance, Harvey couldn't be certain of anything at the moment.

"Dead?" The noble wasn't expecting the mage to look him up and down with scrutiny, but the man did exactly that, searching for whatever signs there were to find. He even took a step towards the rogue, as if to get a better look, to which Harvey held up one of his daggers.

"Forgive me if I want you to stay over there, for now." He apologized. "No hard feelings."

"No hard feelings." The mage echoed softly. "I don't know you, either... And no," he replied finally. "This place hasn't left its mark on you yet, you haven't been here for too long. I don't think you're dead."

"Well, good." Was the only reply Harvey could come up with. What do you even say to that?

Then came a longer pause while the man moved on to studying Harvey's features. "I don't recognize you. It means the worst has already happened, doesn't it?" His voice grew progressively more quiet as he spoke. "The demons were freed from the Circle to prey on the people? I thought the templars for sure would..." The rest was unintelligible.

Harvey tilted his head, unsure what the man was talking about. No, that's wrong. He bit his lip... revealing what he knew wouldn't change anything. "The last I remember, we were still in the Tower. I'm a... Grey Warden." The title rolled off his tongue with difficulty, and Harvey realized it had to be the first time he used it to describe himself. It felt like it belonged to someone else. "I...we came to the Circle to enlist the mages' help, originally. Because of the Blight. My companion, a mage from this Circle, she was Conscripted at the same time that I was. She thought this would be the best place to start gathering allies."

The mage's eyes narrowed, but he finally nodded, thoughtful. "There were rumors the Warden's conscripted one of the freshly Harrowed mages." He admitted. "But the Tower had seen better days."

"Yes, we were trying to make our way through to the source of it all. And then I ended up here, I don't completely remember how." The world will go on without you. The words were like honey to Harvey's ears.

"I see." The mage looked deep in thought. "Then we share a lot in common." The good news didn't seem to lighten his spirits, as if the worst case scenario was only a matter of time. "Welcome to the Fade," he said finally. "Congratulations on escaping your personal Nightmare. As much as it's
worth." The tone wasn't mocking, just strangely defeated.

Harvey once again took in great mountains of rock high up in the sky. They said the dwarves living underground were afraid of the sky falling on their heads. Now he could relate. "I don't really feel like congratulations are in order. This is the Fade, then? How is this even...?" Everybody knew about the Fade...it's just not something you thought about everyday. For the place of dreams, being here felt no different from being awake.

"You're not here, not really. Your mind was trapped here by the Sloth Demon." The stranger looked around, wary. "Like the rest of us. At least the part of it that dreams, I believe."

The rogue nodded, pretending he had more than a vague idea of what the mage was talking about. Yet, strangely, he took it as a good sign. Everything made sense in his fake room before he came to his senses, even meaningless tasks that would get you nowhere. This was not the same. Confusion meant he was thinking properly.

Whatever the mage saw lurking in the shadows, it spooked him. "I...It's too dangerous to stay here in the open. We should go. Come with me... Or don't." He hesitated. "I'll tell you what I know, but it won't make any difference."

Then he turned around and left, too hastily to spare a second glance.

Wait. Are my companions here? Wait. Harvey wanted to call after him, but common sense told him to keep it down. He looked around, spotting a bit of movement somewhere beyond the tall stone formations. Goddammit, I swear, if this is a trap... But a pale mage who was happy to keep his distance was a serious step down from his previous experience. And he was the only one who could help Harvey to make sense of this place.

The rogue cursed under breath and followed, taking long and possibly quiet strides to catch up.
They were stranded on an island.

In hindsight, Harvey wasn't sure why it surprised him, considering the archipelagos splattered across the green sky. He was led along the path between petrified trees, and when the ledge refused to disappear from view after a few minutes his perspective just shifted, like patterns in the grass become a coiled snake when you know what to look for. He realized the view wouldn't differ much no matter where he ended up.

"A flying boat would've been great," he muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing, I was just talking to myself."

This place was alien, and yet pretended to be familiar. It troubled him. Like the aforementioned trees--which Harvey called the giant appendages sprouting from the ground purely for familiarity's sake--they were more akin to monstrous mushrooms, their forms too crude to pass for regular plants. He scratched one in passing, the surface crumbling into small chunks beneath his fingernail, more clay than bark. A brief glance up the leathery canopies revealed they were unrefined, like his room. Maybe some beginner sculptor thought they were good enough, or maybe he was wrong entirely, and they were simply a reflection of something he didn't recognize.

The noble quickened his pace to catch up to his new acquaintance. Beneath his feet, small tumbles of seaweed, these quite lifelike, swayed lightly in a breeze Harvey for the life of him couldn't pick up. He had a childish thought the shrubs thought they were underwater--the Tower was, no matter how you look at it, standing in the middle of a lake. And considering the ever-present green glow, the underwater analogy wasn't the most off the mark comparison he could've come up with. Things always became a little distorted and unreal when you dove under the surface with your eyes open. It felt like that.

He would've been ecstatic, under different circumstances, to explore this place.

Harvey missed a step, feeling a sudden brush against the top of his head. He swatted like a maniac, on reflex, turning around at least two times, before the small globe of light came into view. The rogue stopped abruptly and stared--out of every possible pest with a stinger attached, this wasn't even on the list. The entity was floating a few feet above his head, just beyond his reach, as if enjoying his stumbling. Before he could do anything else, it flew down merrily--perhaps encouraged by the lack of frantic waving, performed a few circles inches away from his dumbfounded face, and then darted towards the space between the trees, waiting for him to follow.

"What was that?" Harvey rasped. He'd just been spooked by a glorified lighting bug.

"Pay it no mind. If you don't give them attention, they won't bother you." The mage halted in his way and was watching the whole ordeal quite passively.

"Oh." The rogue straightened his cloak, scraping for the last bits of his dignity. "A demon, then?" It lingered in the clearing, waiting. Not a huge thing made out of flames or shadows like in the Circle... still, appearances could be deceiving.

"A wisp. Some would call them spirits. These simple ones can be ambiguous, and it's hard to say
what they want. They could lead you on a fruitless goose-chase. Or burn your robes.” If the two examples were a part of his personal experience, the mage's expression didn't show.

I see. Harvey looked at the mage, then at the wisp, then at his weapons, sighed, and sheathed the daggers he'd been holding the whole time. If the man wished him harm, pushing the rogue off the edge would have been ridiculously easy on more than one occasion.

"Harvey Cousland.” He introduced himself, hoping it would make up for those few steps in etiquette he let himself skip earlier. He could bear to trust one person.

"My name is Niall.”

"Niall.” The rogue perked up, memory stirring. "You're the mage Owain was talking about!”

There was a moment of pause when the mage considered the familiar name. "I suppose he would mention me. He did us a favor with the Litany, " His eyes unfocused, angling downward. "I'm afraid he'd have been disappointed if he knew our attempt ended like this. But I'm glad he found a way to survive still."

He didn't sound uplifted, Harvey noticed... But maybe not in an uncaring way. More like it didn't seem to break through the tiredness in his voice. As the mage turned around to carry on with their way, the rogue gave him a proper look-over.

Harvey described the man as pale before. Only now he noticed the paleness went beyond the man’s complexion, sipping into his robes. As if he spent too much time soaking inside a basin, the hot water bleaching out the brightest colors. It made the rogue drop the attention from his surroundings and eye himself for a change. Do I also look like that? Like I'm not real? But quick inspection revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Hesitantly, Harvey again took out one of his daggers and pricked his forearm. A few droplets of blood made their way through the cut.

Ouch. Well, with that out of the way, there was one more thing bothering him. He caught up to the man, this time walking side by side, as much as narrow paths let him.

"This demon, Sloth Demon as you called it...if our, uh, bodies--" he tried to wrap his head around the concept -- "are still in the tower, why hasn't it killed us yet?” Harvey had the faintest recollection of the creature his guide has mentioned. Grotesque, hungry. Why keep them alive for so long?

"The Fade is the place of the mind,” Niall explained, not taking his eyes off the path. "Time holds less sway here than it does in the real world. I know it couldn’t have been more than a few days, maybe hours even, and yet I've been wandering this dreamscape for ages.” This time tiredness rolled off of him in waves. If he just stopped and laid down this very moment, Harvey wouldn't have been surprised. But Niall kept walking. " And it will take some time until it feeds."

The rogue shuddered.

"Come, the place I've told you about isn't far, just beyond the portal.” And he was telling the truth. Not another minute had passed before they made a turn, revealing a shimmering door of purple fog. Niall beckoned in Harvey's direction and then went into it, disappearing. A few seconds later the rogue saw the mage standing on the smaller--in comparison--island, the rock floating twenty or thirty feet away from the edge.

Alright then. He approached the fog, first putting his hand in to see what it would do. No effect... it seemed it was all or nothing. He shook his head - this place was too bizarre. He swallowed hard, stopping himself from closing his eyes, and marched right forward.
A rush of movement came over him, just like before. But it was swifter this time, and before he knew it he was walking out of the twin door, right next to Niall. "I need to... sit down." His stomach was doing flip-flops.

"Help yourself. It can be a bit disorienting at first."

Harvey took the time to force his stomach to settle. In the meantime the mage started puttering around in a manner not unlike a host trying to manage the clutter in front of an unexpected guest. Fumbling with various scrolls and books scattered aimlessly on the ground was the most human thing Harvey has seen the mage do so far. More at ease—and when the world was again completely still—the rogue focused his attention on the place itself.

The space was small, smaller than he anticipated. But it made for a decent hideout, in a sense. Four giant tree-mushrooms sprouted near the edge, obscuring the view from the outside. A comfortable chair stood beneath one of them, accompanied by a few candles burning with a dim light. Cozy. There wasn't much space to move around, even though Niall was creating more by the second. Pieces of alien architecture mashed together with more organic pieces of scenery, the most notable of them being a tall pillar standing more or less at the center of it all. It had three sides, each adorned with a window starting at the height of Harvey's waist. There was nothing particularly impressive about those windows, overlooking the fact that sculpting window frames on a piece of rock didn't give much of a thrilling view.

What Harvey cared more about was the fact that other than him and the mage, there was no other soul in sight.

"I'm sorry, when you mentioned other dreamers, I thought... Never mind." He made a needless assumption. Hope was always the sharpest of tools to faceplant into.

Niall's shoulders slumped visibly, but he continued gathering books and putting them neatly on two piles, sorted by whatever criteria the mage deemed appropriate. "Here? No. I can only offer you a place to talk in peace."

"I didn't mean to..."

"No, your question is valid. I'm afraid I could never get quite in contact with other dreamers, at least not with those who didn't lose their mind. A certain number of blood mages was trapped here, by chance perhaps. I can't imagine the demon would discriminate. They didn't take it too well."

I can imagine. Harvey made himself more comfortable. "You make it sound as if there were a lot of people on this island, and I'm yet to see any. Are they hiding? If my companions are here somewhere, I should find them."

"Not here," Niall shook his head. "We're on the outskirts of the raw Fade, the border of the demon's domain. No particular dreamer influences this place."

The rogue again couldn't quite keep up. "I don't understand. You're implying there's much more to it."

"Not implying, I've been there." The mage pointed a finger towards the sky above. Harvey's eyes followed, unwillingly, knowing what Niall was about to show him. Islands, so many islands.

"So there is a boat."

"A...boat?"
Harvey shook his head in apology and also gestured upward. "Nothing... I'm just trying to wrap my head around... all of this." Being stuck in an endless loop of fixing your clothing sounded almost appealing compared to the overwhelming endeavor presented in front of him. "I'm unsure where to even start."

"You came here because you wanted answers, didn't you?"

Harvey brushed his hand against his cheek, the coarse stubble a reminder that he needed a shave if he ever got out of here, then made a wide gesture encompassing everything around him. "Let's assume that I have no idea about any of this." Niall gave him a straightforward nod which stung more than Harvey was willing to admit. No sugarcoating it. "How does one escape being trapped in the Fade?"

"By killing the demon that trapped you there." The last books joined the pile with a loud thud.

"So simple?"

"So depressingly infeasible."

The rogue waited for Niall to elaborate, but after a few moments it became clear it wasn't going to happen. He scratched his head. "Surely between the two of us we could at least reach my friends, and then we would be five strong, not two," he prodded, the outline of a plan already forming in his head. He'd killed demons before, they weren't invincible, even if this particular one proved tougher than average. "I don't know how useful my own talents will be here, but they're quite capable." Even Amell...if you remembered to keep out of her aim.

A lone finger directed towards the sky somehow managed to compress enough bitterness the rogue fell silent. "It's not the question of killing Sloth, it's a question of getting to it." He continued, voice hollow. "I promised you answers, and I'll do what I can. But don't ask me to go out there again. I did my part and I failed miserably. I've had...enough." There was a pause where Niall again started to fumble about, even though there wasn't any way of making the place more tidy than it already was. He returned to the books, one of the piles he constructed earlier...and started deconstructing it, setting another pile a few feet to the left of the first one. He spent at least two minutes pacing back and forth, seemingly arguing with himself, words too quiet for Harvey to pick up.

The rogue briefly estimated the time it would take him to get back to the shimmering door, if necessary. Always know your exits. But he understood he'd somehow upset the man, so he gave Niall the time to arrange everything in order again, be it here or in his own head.

He still needed answers, and when it finally seemed the mage forgot he was even there, Harvey delicately cleared his throat, enough for Niall to hear, but hopefully not loud enough to startle the mage. The man didn't look in his direction, but the next few words mumbled under breath were loud and clear. "Boat. Boats." With a short stroke of lucidity, Niall nodded towards the windowed pillar in the center of the island. "If you wish to travel between the islands, you should look for panels like this one."

"Panel?" The rogue shot a questioning look towards the pillar, then again towards his new troubling acquaintance for confirmation. But the man was again paying attention elsewhere.

Small steps. Harvey got to his feet and almost reverently circled the tall structure, not sure what he was even trying to accomplish. It was a piece of the Circle Tower lost amidst the amorphous surroundings... or maybe something much older than that. The stonework wasn't what he'd particularly paid attention to while trying to make his way through the demon infested Circle, so he wasn't the best person to compare. But if it was supposed to work as a gateway, like the portals he
encountered so far, he took a wild guess he'd have to go through the window frame. Still, the lack of a purple fog or any other magical shine inside them indicated it was perhaps inactive. Or closed? His hand touched the solid stone behind one, making it clear the only thing he'd acquire by trying to pass through was a concussion. He gave the stone a light tap for a good measure. Nothing. With a sigh, he inspected the frames instead. There were symbols carved into the stone, but every time he tried to focus on one, it escaped his field of vision, and forcing his eyes only resulted in a mild pain behind his temples.

Fine, I give up. "How do you make it work?"

"You can't. You won't. It used to, but it doesn't work anymore." Niall cast the pillar an offended glance. "But believe me, it's for the better."

Harvey took a deep breath and leaned against the pillar, forehead touching the cold surface. "How so?" He started to notice a recurring pattern with Niall's answers, each and every one of them being more or less roundabout version of a 'no'.

"You'll see that this part of the Fade is welcoming in comparison to the rest. It's not so bad here. You don't have to worry about sleeping or eating, and the demons don't chase you beyond the portals. But you won't accomplish anything from this side. You don't want to go there. Maybe someone on the other island will find a way, but from here...it's impossible."

The rogue was suddenly getting tired of this conversation. Friend, the blood mages aren't the only ones who went bad in the head. "So you won't help me?"

Harvey felt, rather than saw Niall shaking his head. "I told you it wouldn't make any difference."

It was the tone that did it. Next thing he knew Harvey was holding the mage by the robes--not because he felt like the man was lying, it seemed like he believed every word that he spoke. But the young noble wholeheartedly wished to shake some semblance of will back into the mage, snap him out of singing the never-changing tune. But he just held for now. No shaking.

"This panel, it worked before," he said, calmly. "Do you know what you'd have to do to fix it?"

"No, and I don't want to." Niall avoided his gaze. "I'm so tired of trying."

Was he serious?! Harvey tightened his grip on the mage's robes, expecting resistance--if not a stream of fire to melt his face off--but Niall went limp and sunk to his knees. The rogue let go, startled, afraid he unwittingly managed to hurt him after all--that and the man's full weight was too much for his arms to handle. He tried to wrap his head around this person. "So you sit here and wait... for the end?"

"The promise this door brings, it's all a lie," Niall hissed through clenched teeth. "You don't know what it's like out there, inside the demon's maze... endless corridors, holes too small to crawl through, doors like iron slabs, walls of fire. It's impossible. I've tried so many times. Something always blocking my way, mocking my effort, I couldn't move forward." He was babbling now, sentences merging into one illegible mess when he described hurdles too terrible to not be a simple exaggeration or misunderstanding. And yet with every word the man became smaller and more pathetic, colors bleaching out of his being, until he was reduced to a hopeless husk shaking on the ground.

"What can you do in the face of such adversity? Nothing," he whispered finally, heavy head disappearing in his hands.
Harvey took a step back in... fear. Maybe disgust. But the mage appeared like he could crumble, and Harvey, as angry as he was, didn't wish to be the cause of it. He was wrong, he read the man wrong. He thought the mage felt relief at finding a kindred soul, but that was only some sort of unnatural apathy, a strange sickness, most likely brought on by this place. It's not fair, it should've been me. I should be the one on the floor crying how terrible all of this is. The worst thing was he could imagine joining Niall if he stayed here for much longer. It's going to be me, if I don't get out of here. Despair was crawling down his spine, inviting him to give in.

He shook it off. "Look, alright, I won't make you do anything. You don't have to go anywhere, are you listening?"

The shaking became more subdued.

"I'm going to go now, look for my companions. We were captured together, they can't be too far away," he declared with more confidence than he actually felt, seeing as he was basing that assumption on absolutely nothing. He didn't care. Maybe it was silly, running as deep as a childish defiance against someone who decided something just couldn't be done. But no giving up yet. "Two more questions and I won't bother you. A pillar like this one, a working one, is there another one on this island somewhere?"

An initial shake of the head, pause, then a small shrug.

Eh, good enough. "You mentioned other dreamers. The people I traveled with, there is a chance you saw them... have you seen a tall man, about my age, short hair the color of wheat? His name is Alistair." Niall shook his head. Harvey then described Amell and Wynne in similar fashion, and got the same reaction, more or less. The mage shrunk even more--if that was possible--at the mention of the senior enchanter. Before he could stop himself, the rogue went on. "Have you seen an older man, gray hair, but still holding up like he was twenty years younger. He was wearing plate armor, with laurel patterns on it.... and ..."

Niall shook his head.

Harvey combed fingers through his hair, unable to hide disappointment. Well, it's not like I was expecting any different.

Niall was still on the ground when he left.
Nightmares & Daydreams III

It was hard to keep track of time with the never-changing sky above, and it was equally difficult to stay in high spirits while running into another dead end.

Harvey leaned over the edge as far as his courage let him. He could make out a bit of the bottom part of the rock he was currently crouching on, jagged edges ending a hundred or so feet below. The fall would have been enough to kill anyone really, and that's without taking into account the vast space that continued on where the stone ended--disappearing in the green mists so far down he couldn't make it out. The rational part of him knew the bottom had to exist...and the part that was clinging to the rocks until his knuckles turned white thought the endless freefall was just as terrifying. Either prospect made him dizzy.

The ledge on the other side of the crevice was taunting him, maybe thirty, maybe forty feet away.

He wasn't optimistic enough not to expect complications, but he wrongly assumed they would come in the shape of various entities infesting the place. Those he managed to avoid with relative ease so far; mostly the burning atrocities, too unfocused with their primal need to set everything on fire to notice one more shadow.

But getting places, that was supposed to be his specialty.

Harvey sat down with a grunt and leaned against a rock, unsure how to proceed. He picked up a piece of debris, and with a halfhearted throw sent it over the edge. He waited for a long time to hear it hit the bottom. It didn't. The neighboring island was tempting him to just go for it. *Maybe if I climbed to get a high ground, and had enough space to gain speed...*

Or if he had a grappling hook, or a rope, or anything.

He thoroughly explored the part of the island where he first met Niall--it held nothing of interest, beyond more misshapen trees, ruins and towering statues of beings the rogue would have trouble describing. So he moved on, directing his footsteps elsewhere, only to find the rest of the island in pieces. Oh, it was intact in general sense of the word, countless parts of it floating close enough to each other one wouldn't call them separate, but not close enough to risk jumping. And even that proved solvable for a while. He found several of the purple portals scattered around, and for a time it was enough to travel from place to place.

But eventually, inevitably, he reached his first dead end. It didn't discourage him, he simply retraced his steps and went the other direction. But it happened again, and *again*, and though there was still ground to cover, he simply ran out of doors.

*What to do, what to do.* From the amount of ground he covered, a few hours must have passed at least, though he felt no fatigue, and wasn't hungry in the slightest. According to Niall time was on his side--and what has long since become a curse for the other man, Harvey still considered a blessing.

His eyes kept scanning the other island, trying to decide if the ledges were closer to each other in some particular spots. They weren't.

*Niall...I shouldn't have left him like that. Or maybe tried harder to snap him out of it.* But what's done is done, there wasn't much he could do about it now. And seeing how the things were going, he will have no choice but to go back anyways. Playing house with a mage for the rest of his life.
Burying that particular image somewhere in the back of his mind, Harvey tried to focus on something positive. In the most realistic scenario his companions were already out, wandering around like he was. If he freed himself, he didn't see how the others would've failed. Wynne was a senior mage, more experienced than the three young wardens combined. Alistair had some basic templar training, didn't he? And Amell...she didn't let anybody tell her what to do, that was for sure.

But they weren't here, and Niall didn't see them either. And... it was silly of him, asking about Father. The rogue was still unsure why he did--Bryce Cousland was dead, and whatever the Chantry meant by the dead returning to the Maker's side, it wasn't here.

But maybe it was... closer, somehow? His heart whispered.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. There it was, another problem circling right above his head. Clingy like a burr on a dog's tail.

Harvey couldn't prove the small globe of light was the same creature over and over, but he had a hunch. The wisp didn't do a great job at hiding its presence, crossing Harvey's path more than a few times with a speedy flourish, like a cat inviting someone to play--so maybe it didn't try to. Consequently the rogue found himself expecting to see it every time he turned around, even actively searching for it when he thought it was gone. And he was keenly aware that was the exact opposite of what the mage instructed him to do.

As he watched, the creature fluttered down and again offered a little dance. Harvey swiped at it without real malice. "Go away!" he hissed through his teeth. "You'll bring everybody and their mother right on my head."

The wisp dodged the incoming hand, retreating behind one of the ruined columns nearby, but not leaving completely. It peeked out, only to hide clumsily when it saw him watching.

"I can still see you." Harvey found a small rock and discretely threw it in that direction. "SHOO."

The sound like snapping of branches somewhere behind him told him it was too late. He glanced beyond his hiding place, just a quick look in case the bug didn't give him away after all. The sounds of snapping branches or crackling coals, he corrected himself. It was one of those flame demons, most likely one he slipped past not too long ago. Still relatively far, thank the Maker those blasted things made so much noise. It was moving with purpose, though surprisingly it wasn't heading in Harvey's direction.

I'll wait until it moves on, then I'll head back left again. Maybe I missed something, he decided. He glanced in the direction of the wisp, worried the entity was going to draw the other demon's attention on purpose. But the small spirit was gone.

Well, at least I don't have to worry about that... he comforted himself. Then he flinched when a loud cry seared through his thoughts.

"Please. I just want to get out of this place!" It was so loud and clear, the speaker should have been standing beside him, screaming in his ear. But the shaken rogue didn't see anyone besides the flame demon in the distance. His eyes were drawn to the scene, morbid fascination mixing with confusion.

The fiery creature roared in fury, sound deep like a forest fire. It thrashed around, swiping with its massive arms, carving out furrows in the ground, and setting fire to the small seaweed-like plants. Thin branches sizzled and died in an instant, setting myriads of orange sparks into the air.

It's swiping at nothing. Harvey crouched behind the stone, torn. Was he losing his mind?
"HELP!"

Harvey's eyes widened. *A living breathing person.* There had to be. The rogue couldn't see them, and yet... Urged by an impulse he reached for his weapons, already out of hiding, feet picking up the pace on uneven ground. Hoping the monster wasn't paying attention to its surroundings.

There was only one demon, he could handle it.

In the quietest charge if there ever was one, two blades found the Rage Demon's heart, thrusting behind and below. Putting all of his weight behind the attack, Harvey plunged both weapons up to their hilts into the liquid flame.

The metal became uncomfortably hot, even through his leather gloves, and Harvey fought the instinct to shut his eyes so close to a source of heat. The demon's form spasmed in surprise and anger...and hopefully pain. But not quite enough, and Harvey now had its full attention. Ignoring the previous target, the creature rose, form growing, so tall Harvey's feet dangled above the ground.

Hanging on for dear life, flaming arms grabbed at him, and Harvey dodged once, then twice, barely out of reach. The third time he narrowly avoided having his cloak set on fire. Harvey grit his teeth. *Maybe this wasn't such a brilliant idea.* But letting go now would mean he'd leave his weapons behind.

Crushing pain in his back sent all air flying out of his lungs in a pained gasp. Stone shards went flying everywhere, one of them leaving a bloody scape on his cheek. He didn't pay enough attention -- in trying to get rid of the unwanted passenger, the demon hauled itself onto one of the stone appendages. Harvey was now hanging onto one dagger.

*Great Dane's bitch.* This is not what 'handling it' meant. He had to end it quickly.

The tree-mushroom was still close enough. Swinging back, Harvey found footing against the hard trunk and pushed, twisting the remaining dagger with both hands with all his strength. The creature gurgled in anger, and for a moment the heat became unbearable. Harvey averted his face, nostrils filling with the smell of burning leather.

And then he fell to the ground, surrounded by ash and hissing coals, all that remained of the demon.

It took a moment before he got his bearings back, dark spots still dancing faintly in front of his vision. He reclaimed both of his daggers, halfway buried under the remains of burned seaweed, and put them back into their sheaths. It was as he had thought, Harvey admitted quietly to himself, massaging a still stiff shoulder. Without Alistair or even Amell being there to deliver a finishing blow, he was at a disadvantage. Stupid, that was too hasty of him--especially now that he took in the nearest surroundings, the demon's victim still being nowhere in sight. So it was a ruse after all, the rogue turned around disappointed. Even though he wouldn't have given the hulking demon the benefit of the doubt.

"Thank you. I thought...no one was going to come."

*Or maybe it wasn't?* The rogue perked up. There was that voice again. Harvey still couldn't see anyone, but it came with a sense of direction he didn't catch the first time around.

He almost missed the source of it. He took in the smouldering dollop of fur and limbs halfway buried inside a hole and thought it was a joke. But he crouched down anyways, and gently cupped the creature in both hands.
"Too late for me," The sorry bundle spoke softly, making the rogue's arms stiffen in surprise. Of all the things...The limp body weighed more than Harvey expected, a spark of life barely present inside the dark beady eyes.

"You're not really a rat, are you?" Harvey was at loss of what else to say. Of course it wasn't, rats couldn't talk. His gloves were getting wet with ichor and that was more concerning. He hesitated. "Is there anything I could do to..."

"Not much time left. Kill Yevena, kill other demons guarding Sloth," the small rodent pleaded, breathing labored. "They're hiding behind the unseen doors. You won't get to it if you don't!"

*Unseen doors.* What a sobering thought. Harvey was shaking his head, not to deny the request, but finally faced with the brutal honesty of it all. "Friend, I can't even reach places I'm able to see on this island..."

"You... will..." the creature croaked with its last bit of strength. "I will show you how." This time the voice left a tingling sensation in the back of his neck -- it stayed there even as the words became progressively weaker.

"Please, make them..." In the last bit of effort the small body tensed horribly, and then went completely limp. If the creature wished to curse its enemies, or to bless its friends, Harvey never found out. Gently, he laid the small body on the ground and unsure what else to do he simply stayed there, watching as its form became grey, then brittle, until it scattered around as dust. He felt it deserved at least that bit of courtesy.

*I'm sorry, I didn't even ask for your name.*

He should leave now, staying too long in one place will only bring more attention to himself, Harvey thought, without moving an inch. He carefully touched the nape of his neck. He could still feel the tingling, it was getting progressively more *pressing*. Like a thousand needles touching his skin...not painful, just distracting. He scratched at his neck, trying to get rid of the weird sensation, but it didn't help. He cast the remains a worried look. "What did you do?"

No answers from the dead, and he really didn't expect any, but...

*No really, what did you do,* Harvey scratched at his neck, alarmed. It was getting worse. The tingling traveled down his spine, all the way to the tailbone, bringing a sudden sense of vertigo. The world spun, the entrance hole in the ground previously not larger than his fist, now a tunnel he could easily crawl into.

*A passage!*

Like a drunk he stumbled into it, happy to make a use of the opportunity. Not questioning it...maybe till halfway through the tunnel.

He leaped through the other side as if he were chased by a thousand bees and collided with a rock, the blow throwing stars in front of his eyes but doing nothing for the panic.

*NO NO NO I'M NOT A RAT NO.*

And with that he was on all fours, bum sticking up in a undignified position. Human hands and human feet.

His legs gave out from under him and Harvey toppled over, as graceful as a falling log, blood pumping in his ears with a deafening torrent. His heart calmed down gradually as the relief took
over. Did it... did what he though happened just happened? He touched his face, feeling the comforting lack of whiskers. He was himself... but he wasn't himself just a moment ago.

That's it, he *was* going insane. It's all over. He should just lay here, at least make himself comfortable before some demon came to put him out of his misery.

This was too much. He stared at the sky, wondering why in the Maker's name he was the one who had to go through all of this. He was no mage, how was he supposed to know what to do...or even what to expect. He remembered wanting to be one as a child, even play-pretending, as you do when you're too young to care about propriety. How distant it all seemed now. How juvenile. He hated this place.

*I want to go home.* But why even bother, the place didn't exist anymore. Foreign feet now traversed the corridors that belonged to his parents, to his brother and to him, doing Andraste knows what to the place he grew up in and loved.

As he was reaching new heights of feeling sorry for himself, a small treacherous part of his mind was already wondering if he could do it again.

*Do what, change into a rat?* The rogue grimaced, scrambling onto his feet with the strength of denial. That didn't happen. There was no way... This was... this was a completely different part of the island than before, he realized.

A tiny floating rock, barely twenty feet to walk across, small even compared to Niall's hiding base. There were no purple doors here, only a hole he allegedly came out of. And not one -- it didn't take him long to find a second one, loosely covered with a flat rock, and then another, a fissure leading under a lone stone pillar.

He must have done...something, at least, he finally admitted, pacing on the tiny space that was available. The familiar precipice welcomed him from every side. And he had to figure out what, because there was no way he was getting off of here otherwise.

Incredibly hesitant--when he figured he had no other options--he sat down in front of the hole he emerged from before, glaring at it, almost daring it to say something. How were the tunnels even connected, with the pieces of the island floating so far from each other, Harvey couldn't tell. So far he encountered windows that turned out to really be doors, and purple fog that was also a door, so it wasn't too much of a stretch assuming the mouse hole could be one as well. The rogue thoughts kept meandering, avoiding the subject... but he knew where all the paths were leading him. The small tunnel entrance was glaring back at him. And it was winning.

What if I...really could? he wondered. That creature...no, he corrected himself. That person...he only looked like a rodent. What was stopping him, really? He could play-pretend. He was already almost-acquainted with a nameless ball of light. Let's go all or nothing.

*This is one of the...no, this is the craziest thing I've ever done. And if it fails I'm not telling anyone about this, ever. They can skin me alive.* The tingling in his neck was still present, subdued enough he would ignore it if he didn't know what to look for. On a hunch, he focused on it, inviting it to spread over his neck, and again down his spine. In wonder he realized it complied.

Astonished, he watched the world becoming larger, and larger...His center of balance shifting, making it comfortable to stand on both hands and feet...

On the tiny island, for the next hour or so, one could spot a silhouette changing shape over and over. Carefully at first, the shift taking a few moments to complete, in time becoming more fluent, eager even, in the end taking as much effort as a blink of an eye.
Harvey toppled to the ground yet again, winded, cheeks flushed with red from hearty laughter. Sitting down he wiped a bit of moisture from the corners of his eyes, quietly thanking his rat friend.

Alright, the rogue clapped his hands, suddenly in high spirits. Now he could carry on.

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He returned to Niall's tiny island still a bit dazed. The search turned out to be fruitless after all--even after clearing the rest of the island, Harvey didn't find anything helpful. Still, he didn't consider it a failure. The rat mentioned unseen doors and that was one clue more than the rogue had before. He hoped Niall could shed a bit of light on the subject--if the mage was in a frame of mind to talk at all.

The first thing the rogue noticed was that the mage didn't in fact spend the time Harvey had been gone in the position the rogue left him in. Sitting in a chair staring at something only he could see was only a tad better in Harvey's mind, but it gave him a bit of hope. When the rogue approached, the mage offered no greetings beyond a sullen look in his eyes, but then he hesitated, doing a double-take. "You look different, did something happen?"

Harvey's hand instinctively went to his backside, half expecting to find a tail there. He squinted, suspicious. "What do you mean?"

Niall titled his head, unsure. "You look like you are more than you were before."

You could say that. "I... changed into a rat." He knew how it sounded. "Did you know you could do things like that here, change into a rat?"

The mage's eyes went wide. "You can..."

In the middle of the island, the windows on the Panel sparked with a sudden surge of power, frames gaining depth, two out of the three filling with a grey fog, becoming what Harvey saw once before, in his own Nightmare. Portals. Gates. The sudden burst distracted both of them, Harvey's jaw hanging open, not used to problems solving themselves.

"How did it... but... you said?" The rogue asked, very happy--and very confused.

Niall went quiet, as if entranced. "It was me..." he spoke softly, pale as a sheet. "I didn't even know it, and I was doing it."

"I don't understand, did what?" Harvey was looking at the pillar as well, a little apprehensive taking his eyes off of it will cause it to close again.

"I apologize, I think it was me who locked those gates in the first place." Niall explained, casting his eyes down again. "I didn't want to... I didn't mean to?" He said in a tone as if he was asking himself.

Harvey realized that whatever happened, maybe it wasn't the best idea to push it. He brushed his hand through his hair. "At this point, I don't think I even care. Look, it's open." The quiet hum of the windows was the most beautiful sound that he ever heard. He put a hand on the mage's shoulder, the man looking like he wanted the ground to burst open and swallow him whole. "You opened it."

"Yes." Niall faced him, struck with realization. "Because you... I saw holes, too small for a normal person to crawl into. But you..." This time he grabbed Harvey by both shoulders, there was a desperate strength behind it. "You could go through them! Farther than I ever got to."

Harvey nodded. "I know."
They talked for a while after that, Niall relating everything he encountered on other islands belonging to Sloth with surprising diligence. There was a lot of it, including a portion of the layout of the maze itself, more than Harvey expected from someone who claimed they didn't 'get very far'.

At one point the noble was on a verge of voicing his doubts if his new ability would really help that much, but seeing the complete change of demeanor even the small bit of hope brought to the man, he kept his mouth shut. He liked the focused, determined mage better than the sorry husk he'd been reduced to before.

"I suppose all of this," Niall gestured towards surrounding archipelago of five major islands," is the demon's domain. "But where you truly need to go, is the small island at the center of it all."

Harvey did his best not to look intimidated. "You called it a Sloth Demon. Maintaining all of this seems like it would require a lot of work." That earned him a faint chuckle, another sign the mage was feeling better. Harvey's lips quirked up slightly in response. "I assume when you are powerful enough to get others do things for you, you don't have to move a finger."

"But," Niall continued, "this is an advantage, maybe the only one we as prisoners are going to get. I've been free to wander this place for a while now, and the demon never came after me. I haven't seen the creature on any of the islands either."

"Our rat friend told me I'll have to defeat all of the demons guarding Sloth. Behind unseen doors. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes, those demons I've seen. They are...far stronger, but not as strong as Sloth. They have to have hideouts, though the unseen doors is not something I've ever encountered before. But it makes sense, they protect their master's domain from being disturbed. It means as long as they exist, the door to Sloth will remain closed. I wouldn't...If your friends are still somewhere out there, they might be able to help you. I would search for them first, if I were you. Taking the demons all on yourself is not a task that will end up successful."

Harvey shrugged. "Don't worry, I wasn't planning to."

He was ready now, as much as one's ever going to be, he supposed. As he approached the pillar, he noticed Niall didn't follow.

The rogue understood, and didn't insist anymore. "Any advice, then?"

Niall's next words were thoughtful. "Wishing your way out of this place might make it so."

It was Harvey's turn to laugh, a short, desperate sound that was more like a dog's bark. "If that were true, wouldn't you be out of here already?"

Niall looked as miserable as the first time Harvey saw him. "Perhaps. But the creatures of this place can wish as well."

The mist in the windows flickered as if reacting to the mage's anguish, and that more than anything convinced Harvey that Niall himself was responsible for the panel not working earlier. *Feelings and thoughts have power here.* He chose his next words carefully. Are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

Niall hesitated, but finally shook his head. "I shouldn't. I would only slow us down. And not because
I wouldn't be able to go where you go. In my heart, I already decided there is no way out of this place, not for me. But maybe there is for you... I would only get us both lost deeper inside the maze.”

“I'll check on you, as soon as I make progress,” Harvey promised.

Niall's smile was a bit sad when the rogue leaned one foot against the frame of the portal and leapt into the unknown.
The darkspawn lived as if they'd always been here. In this place created by the dreams of terrified minds, they nested inside the scattered alcoves, where the dim corridors twisted into knots; the stench of decay and something strange and metallic the only warning for those who wandered too close--often the last mistake they've ever made.

The Song permeated the maze like a fog, her tune sweet as overripe fruit, providing sustenance for the darkspawn infestation. The creatures found their purpose intertwined between the verses--glorified marionettes, patrolling relentlessly, searching for intruders, killing everyone who didn't find themselves lucky enough to be a part of their bond. And they roamed, and they scavenged for bits and pieces. Metal for armor and weapons here, limbs for bones and ligaments there. The resources were always around, and rarely fast enough to escape.

And yet the Song was a clever lie. The creatures didn't search for their Old God. The tune didn't carry that primal thrall, the greatest urgency. They didn't feed their Broodmothers, nor did they have any. Absolved from the eternal dilemma of chicken and egg they existed for the sake of existence, consumed for the sake of consuming, killed for the sake of killing.

A fake Song used to be more than enough for the shadow of Darkspawn.

Their purpose has always been scarce, but lately even that managed to diminish. It was a source of...wrongness...for the lone hurlock guarding a door at the end of a dead end corridor. The verses of the song became diluted in the sudden silence of the maze. They were still meant for many, yet the creature failed to feel the presence in their shared bond anymore. No correction followed, the Song circled around as it always had, a glorious symphony with no end and no beginning, like a snake eating its own tail. There were always darkspawn here, and there always will be. Even though there weren't. The contradiction was beyond the hurlock's capability of understanding. It still guarded the door, that was its purpose, and denying the Song was a concept beyond imagination, but conflicting information has surfaced something akin to doubt in the mind of the creature.

It listened in. Even the never-ending wails of the nearby hellhounds fell silent. How long has it been?

A brief impression of a rat tail flashed by the outskirts of the hurlock's vision, and the monster stirred when a nearly insignificant weight burdened its serrated pauldron. The last thing it knew was the feather-light touch of twin blades against its neck.

And then the purpose ended.

Harvey wiped his weapons against the rags darkspawn wore under the armor, though it was almost impossible to find parts of the fabric that wouldn't be soiled and foul. The effect was less than satisfactory.

"I told you patience pays off," he addressed the wisp, who, as soon as the hurlock was dead, emerged from round the corner. It circled around, not paying attention to the body--or him for that matter--and went straight for the door, nonchalantly bouncing off the wooden surface.

"You're harder to impress than an Orlesian goat," the rogue muttered under his breath. But even the small spirit's obvious sulking couldn't stop him from getting slightly excited. The main paths of the maze converged here, in this very spot.

After what his internal clock determined as days, he was certain he was moving past the threshold
Niall had never conquered. Of course, there was always a possibility this door lead to yet another part of the maze, getting him entangled and in search for another batch of the rat tunnels he used to navigate the place. His guts told him otherwise. He had no evidence, but there were certain signs. The darkspawn patrols have been getting progressively more frequent and better equipped the closer he got to this particular area. The place was finite, even Niall admitted that much. The islands had their unchanging dimensions, their diameter, and even the demon was confined by the realities of spacial planning. He was getting close to something important.

When he first realized it, the slow weeding out of the darkspawn became almost painfully redundant. Especially when sneaking past unnoticed took almost no effort for a smaller, more nimble creature he could become. But the comfort of a quick, unhindered retreat--that was something he might need more than those few lost hours. Who the hell knew how strong those guardian demons were.

The rogue shooed the spirit away from the door and slowly pushed the metal handle. The door creaked open to reveal another short passage, a more sturdy, intricate door waiting for him on the other side--almost taunting him behind a wall of fire.

"Enough with you." Harvey frowned, irritated by the heat radiating from the crackling flames. One glance up the walls confirmed they were as rough and uneven as the ones he encountered before. His transformation into a rat was effortless, one of those blink and you'll miss it type of things. One moment a man was inspecting the stonework, the next a rodent was nearly halfway up the wall, climbing up and up and proceeding further only when it almost reached the ceiling. The walls were hot from the flames below, but not too hot if he jumped quickly enough. He was barely getting blisters now.

The rat jumped from above the flames, and the human fell to the other side of the fire and immediately rolled over, putting out the smoldering cloak. The garment was in a much worse shape than when the noble first entered the maze; blackened, with countless holes making it a little more than a rag at this point. He could only pull that trick maybe one or two times more before he'd have to let it go. Too bad, I liked this one. Hopefully it will still be intact in the world outside this shithole.

As soon as he was sure he hadn't caught fire, he moved on towards the next door. The wisp was already there, impatiently waiting for Harvey to move his ass and open it. The rogue could tell by the way it flailed, like a cat's tail when the cat in question was about to stop playing nice. He shook his head. "For such a small thing, you're surprisingly temperamental."

Like many times before, the spirit didn't answer.

Harvey gave up trying to figure out the creature. It didn't interfere during fights, and it didn't go out of its way to cause harm... yet. Chasing it away did absolutely nothing; every time he tried it disappeared for the time it took him to turn two or three corners, before returning, ready to follow along, if just a little bit more pouty. So eventually he just didn't bother anymore. And when the small spirit realized it wouldn't have anything thrown in its direction anymore, it revealed it had an attitude. It wanted him to fight instead of sneaking around, and got impatient when he insisted on checking routes that led nowhere. He wasn't sure why it insisted on being a guide, hence his taking everything it did with a grain of salt.

Let's go, hopefully I'll get to see a familiar face soon.

He tried the door. It resisted him, which hadn't happen before, so with a grunt he doubled his efforts, now even more certain he was on the right track. Old hinges creaked in protest, the door itself either incredibly heavy or barred with something from the other side. Droplets of sweat appeared under his brown. If there's someone pushing in the other direction, I'm going to be mad.
But it had to give, it could give, he knew. Harvey just needed a little bit of an opening--just a little bit--to slip in. *Almost there.* A whiff of cold air coming from the cracked door lashed at his face, and the rogue almost lost all the progress, surprised.

The wisp hung right in front of his face.

"Niall says you're a spirit of purpose," the rogue huffed, beads of sweat now running down his neck. Slowly but surely his arms were getting tired, and the wall of fire behind him made lingering in the corridor less than comfortable. "How about helping with the door?"

The ball of light pondered, swaying back and forth, then slowly approached the door. And vanished behind the minuscule opening Harvey had been fighting to create for the last few moments.

"Little *shit.*" Harvey grit his teeth and gave an angry push, the hinges caving enough at last for him to slip inside--not without a certain dose of gymnastics.

The door shut behind him like a coffin.

The darkness surrounded him, and the light coming from the wisp became a blinding torch before his eyes adjusted. The spirit illuminated a bit of a wall and a low ceiling, so they must've found themselves inside another room. Or maybe corridor? The rogue strained his eyes trying to make out anything else--how far was the opposite wall, any possible obstacles, arrows flying in his general direction, anything. But he could very well be staring into a dark gaping maw.

His ears picked up only his own heartbeat. The wisp, as usual, didn't make any notable sound.

*Just what I needed.* The first tendrils of cold penetrated the crevices of his clothes and Harvey shuddered, arranging the sorry remains of his cloak just a little bit tighter around himself. His tired breaths were crystallizing in the freezing air, inviting cold inside his lungs.

The little spirit drifted deeper inside the chamber, and Harvey cast a longing glance towards the door, wondering how much trouble it would give him when things undoubtedly went south. Probably too much to consider. *Forward, you have to go forward.* He reminded himself. He ventured in, falling a few feet behind the wisp. The darkness could be his friend, if he made it so.

After a few careful steps, the soles of his boots lost the hewn stone beneath, stepping onto something more powdery and crunchy. He bent down and slowly scooped it up. *Ice crystals? Snow. Sure, why not... the Fade makes no sense anyways.* But even to him this seemed out of place, one would expect more fire and smoke. Niall definitely didn't mention anything of the sort. The rogue had managed to progress right into the unknown. *Happy day.*

He threw the snow away, and that's when his hand brushed against something solid. He reeled back, seeing a darkspawn aiming at him with its nasty axe. On instinct he took a step back to dodge, and his behind met with a sharp point. He was done for, ambushed, but then a second passed, and another, and nothing broke the stillness. The monster in front of him didn't move, the first impression being a trick of shifting shadows. *The room didn't seem so cold anymore, though. Maker.* Harvey gave a sigh of relief, he wanted to laugh. A stupid statue. So strangely lifelike, down to the wretched armor, even wrinkles on its face locked in a perpetual sneer were convincing... *as if*..

The dim light from the wisp moved on from the creature, taking away most of the details, until even the silhouette itself half drowned in the surrounding darkness.

"Wait, I was trying to get a closer look..." he called after the spirit who didn't even slow down. It had gone further--not caring about Harvey's annoyance--revealing another hulking figure, then the next
one, five in total. All frozen with their weapons drawn, all depicted in the middle of an assault.

*This room...this room is bad news.* Hairs were standing on the back of his neck now, but the rogue couldn't look away, fascinated. The shadows changed with every angle, creating an illusion of movement. And he couldn't swear they weren't moving. Harvey crept between them, every step on the snow annoyingly loud. *What the hell happened here?* The figures were standing in a semi-circle, not perfectly aligned, but close.

Well, when the hand points towards the sky, only a fool looks at the finger. Harvey turned around in the direction the figures were facing. "A little light?" he asked the wisp, who'd stuck by the figures. "I'm sure you want to leave this place as much as I do."

The ball of light hovered back and forth, unconvinced solving the mystery of the statues would help with that in any way. Then it zigzagged sharply in the air. Harvey could almost see the rude gesture.

The rogue rolled his eyes and pointed towards the darkness. "Please?"

Reluctantly, and only because the rogue didn't seem likely to change his mind, the wisp approached and parted the shadows. Harvey held his breath, when the light revealed an armored human on the ground.

"See?" he told the wisp. "Thank you."

A statue--just like the darkspawn surrounding him--a lone templar knelt in the snow, the blade of his sword planted firmly like a crutch, hands wrapped around the hilt almost hugging the weapon. Harvey thought he looked like a holy man, deeply immersed in prayer, and like a beggar at the same time.

They weren't statues, this he realized. But Harvey found it hard to think of the man--and the monsters surrounding him--in terms of corpses. It was ridiculous, because common sense told him that's what happened when you freeze to death. And yet there was a difference between a dead body and someone who's still alive--and yes, usually breathing was an essential part of it. But the tension hanging in the air, he couldn't explain it. The templar was frozen in place just like the rest, but with the spirit's shine so close, there was the faintest impression of steam coming off his armor. Was that also around the darkspawn, or did he miss it?

"Hey," he addressed the man, voice barely louder than a whisper. "Hello?" There was only silence from the still figure. Hesitantly, Harvey laid his hand on the figure's shoulder. It was covered in frost.

The templar's head jerked slightly, small bits of ice breaking off of his hair and landing beneath his feet. Slowly, as if woken up from a deep sleep, the warrior met his gaze. "What have you done?" he said.

The room exploded with a simultaneous cacophony of light, movement, and bloodbath. The templar pushed past the rogue with a righteous force, knocking him on his back, long enough for Harvey to miss the rest of the statues coming back to life. When he got to his feet the chamber was already swarming with darkspawn, illuminated with a dim glow of torches now burning on every wall, surrounding the templar and threatening to overwhelm him with numbers alone.

Harvey didn't wait for an invitation; it was obvious which side he wanted to win.

The templar swung his blade in wide arcs, and a shower of blood and digits followed every time it cut a darkspawn too eager to draw near. It wouldn't last, the monsters weren't the most acute of thinkers, but even in the skirmish Harvey could recognize the first signs of flanking. The templar
knew what he was doing, but it was still five on one. Harvey jumped into the fray with no remorse, and suddenly it was four on one when his blades found an artery inside a muscled, ugly neck. The nearest darkspawn hesitated seeing its fallen comrade, and it was enough time for the templar to impale him like a piece of roast.

The remaining monsters scattered in disarray. The rogue took care of the one that gave him the initial scare--the one with the axe--as it was trying to choose its opponent. When it finally rested beneath his feet, a small gurgle escaping the twisted jaw, another hurlock's head rolled in Harvey's direction--the templar was also done.

Puddles were quickly forming on the stony floor as the snow melted away, mixing with foul darkspawn blood. The chamber turned out to be smaller than Harvey anticipated, still not the friendliest of places, a damp, windowless cellar, but definitely less creepy the then the winter wonderland from before.

"I thought there wouldn't be any templars left in the Tower," he said the man. But that wasn't true, was it. They encountered another, though his mind didn't belong to him anymore.

The templar sent him a gesture of gratitude, and shook his head. He was a young man, a bit older than the noble, ordinary looking if not for his pale eyes. "One should not prolong the inevitable forever. I'm free to go, I must awaken." Saying that, he sheathed his sword.

Harvey gave him a very sour half-smile. "Good luck with that." If that were a choice, he wouldn't be here exploring this shithole of a darkspawn nest.

The armored hand touched his right shoulder and Harvey almost jumped, his right boot stepping into a puddle. There was no way the templar could've moved so quickly. But the gesture didn't feel threatening, maybe a bit too familiar for someone you just met. Harvey shifted uncomfortably under the weight -- it carried a pressure beyond that of a palm, metal or not.

"Take my power," the templar said suddenly, "to see what's unseen." He was looking at him, almost through him, as if he were in two places at once. Harvey watched as he became faint like a ghost, before disappearing in a flurry of ice crystals. As one does when you're in the Fade, apparently.

Harvey took it in; a bit defeated, but not surprised, not anymore, this place managed to stomp that particular emotion to dust. If something mundane had happened, like the warrior decided to stay, now would be damn surprising.

"Could anyone, anyone, in this place behave like a normal person?!" he challenged the empty room. He shook his leg, a bit of dampness getting through the leather and only adding to his irritation. "Powers, riddles, can someone just please help me get out of here?" His voice echoed between the walls with a dramatic flare, and was answered by absolutely no one. I guess that means no. Behind him, the door he entered through creaked open, gone was the force that was keeping it shut--as if the templar's presence bewitched the whole area.

Maybe Niall would know something about this. The templar really disappeared, perhaps woke up. If that was a person at all, and not one of the locals. See the unseen. What was that supposed to mean? And how was he going to know if he did or not? He looked around, but nothing has changed as far as he was concerned. He didn't want to sound ungrateful, but it wouldn't have killed the templar to leave Harvey more clear directions. He knew how to wake up, why share such a trifling bit of trivia?

The rogue took a deep breath, willing the overflowing frustration to subside. It didn't work very well. In the end, he had to move forward. Always forward.

Other than the darkspawn now sprawled on the ground, the chamber didn't hold any more mysteries.
It didn't hold any other entrances either, but after a quick inspection he found another rat hole. *Off we go then.*

At least the wisp looked happy about leaving.

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His goal greeted him as a reflection of his own annihilation. He hadn't figured on being afraid. He wasn't the first time, it all happened so quickly, and there were other things to consider. He hadn't thought the encounter scarred him so deeply, but here he was, feet planted firmly to the ground, and the only thing he could do was keep peeking around the damn corner every damn two minutes, instead of deciding on what to do.

*Maker dammit,* Harvey cursed silently, his back against a wall, hitting the surface with his head just a bit too hard; the dull pain a fitting addition to the blood rushing in his ears. Not helping with the panic at all. *No, no, no.* He wasn't going to fight one of these things. Not here, not now, and *definitely not alone.*

The last time he faced an ogre, it took a legend right out of Fereldan lore to save his sorry behind. He'd been a bug in the monsters grip, his ribs just as squishable as an insect's limbs. And this beast was even bigger and meaner than the last one, with sharp claws waiting to tear you apart, or horns to ram you to the ground, leaving a bloody trail halfway through the chamber with your broken body at the end of it. The rogue shuddered, tugging the cloak closer around him. He didn't have to imagine, he'd *lived it.* There was no way... He risked another peek. Of course, nothing has changed in the span of the last few moments. The giant beast was still hunched in front of what Harvey figured was his destination. At first glance, it looked simply like one of the portals he encountered before--but it reminded him of the window he used to get out of his personal nightmare. Something in the shape... or the design, call it a hunch.

Or maybe the fact it was guarded by the biggest monster in this whole cursed maze, that might have been it.

His brain scrambled for a plan. Could he sneak past the hulk as a rat? Maybe. When his companions found a bloody pancake on the floor, they won't even know that was him. Which could be a good or a bad thing, if you think about it. Nobody will say, *'Hey, he died a rat.'* No, he had to bet on something safer, for the lack of a better word. This wasn't a game of who's the most daring hero around, and he would like very much to stay alive. The first notions of an idea were already there--the chamber the ogre occupied wasn't a dead end. It connected through a spacious door to another room Harvey couldn't make out from this angle. In theory, if he waited long enough, the monster might just get off its ass and move there. But he couldn't just take a rain-check and come back another time. It seemed just... it seemed like something Niall would do.

Every time he encountered a hurdle, he remembered that little island and the chair and the books, and the candle burning beside the chair--that candle was truly the worst part of it--and turning back became just a little bit harder than pressing on. He never mentioned that to the mage of course. He still had some manners left. Still, defeating a hurdle was different from being outright unreasonable. There wouldn't be any shame in regrouping at this point.

It was at that time when the rogue noticed the lack of the ever-present bug in his immediate vicinity. He scanned around, and finally saw it--and cursed the Maker again. The wisp was at this very moment dancing in front of the ogre's head. Harvey paled. *It's going to lure him here, I know it is, that little...* He watched in morbid fascination as the beady eyes followed the small spirit's performance, and he was ready to run as quickly as his legs could carry him. And then the greatest of miracles happened, the beast stood up--a tremor Harvey felt even fifty feet away--and was led slowly
to the back room, the spirit flying in front of its eyes in hypnotic patterns.

You beautiful little bastard. The rogue shook his head in disbelief.

The wisp's motive was the first thing on his mind, but no... No time, NO TIME. If he didn't go now he never would. This was his chance. When the monstrosity was completely out of view, Harvey counted to ten for good measure, and before he could talk himself out of it, he crept quickly, silently, where the monster sat before. The rogue jumped through the portal, not even checking if the ogre saw him. He'd deal with that later, if he had to.

The now familiar ride sent him through the mists, right in the middle of a sunless clearing, where the senior enchanter stood, weighed down by the scene around her.
"Don't move, these should help."

Harvey didn't pay attention. He couldn't remember arriving at the sea, and yet its green depths were dancing in front of his eyes; shimmering, unwilling to stand still. Such pretty water, it embraced him with the sweet promise of solitude and he was falling into it, deeper and deeper--as deep as he wanted to go. Blue sparkling stars danced around him, their cold glow a beacon of comfort.

A face appeared above his own, out of focus. Why was it keeping him away from the sea? He couldn't be far away from home now. The man was repeating a question, over and over, but the words were slipping past him, without meaning. Harvey found the concern in the voice unnecessary. "You don't have to worry about me, I know how to swim," he drawled.

He was unceremoniously slapped, once, then a second time. The first hit seemed dull, but the second, definitely one with more frustration behind it, shot through the haze and sparkly lights, smuggling a sliver of clarity inside Harvey's brain. The worried face slowly came into focus, and the rogue realized it had a name.

"Look at me. No, no, no, there's nothing interesting behind me. Look at my face. Do you know where you are?" Niall asked him.

Harvey gave his best effort to focus, but his brain was still wading through molasses. "I think... so." The vast waters promising to swallow him inside their depths, they were not a sea, but a sky tinted with greys and greens, a Fade sky. His eyes widened suddenly. "Oh no."

He bolted right up, or at least tried to, and as a result a half dozen or so blue crystals tumbled onto the ground. The mage rested a hand on his shoulder and gently--but still not taking no for an answer--laid him back on the ground. Harvey accepted his help without complaint, every part of his body chose that moment to rebel and was threatening to pull him back down anyways. The sky above just about stopped spinning, that thin threshold between not knowing if you're drunk and moving your head to discover that you still are. "I feel like shit," he said.

"I know." Niall was carefully arranging the crystals back on his chest. He put one on his heart, then one near each and every limb. "You didn't look well when you stumbled in, you collapsed right away. Now don't move, I'm going to put one on your head now."

"I don't remember that." Harvey didn't put up any more fuss when the mage performed the strange ritual – every inch of his body hurt like it had been put through a meat-grinder, and the touch of the crystals near his limbs relieved the soreness considerably. He got almost cross-eyed, trying to get a closer look at the miracle cure Niall placed just beyond his field of vision, but without moving his head in the process it was pretty much impossible. "I remember running away." Among other things.

Niall put his hands up and admired his handiwork. "These are all I could get in a short amount time, so we have to work with less than I would like to. It might take a while."

"The crystals?" The rogue shuddered, but not enough to ruin anything. It took a conscious effort for him not to raise his hand to touch one. "They heal you? Just like that?" I thought they were blue stars.

"Fade crystals strengthen the connection between you and your body beyond the Fade." The mage corrected, his tone taking on an academic note--Harvey doubted Niall was even aware when that
happened. "They synchronize your form with the state your body remains in in the real world. We usually use them in longer rituals, drawing out the power of the Fade - to help us seed ourselves in the reality and lessen the danger of..." Harvey let him continue for a while, even though he personally felt lost in the drawn out descriptions concerning applications of magic. Niall connected words the rogue was familiar with in new and abstract ways, and asking about these connections would prolong the conversation indefinitely. But it was nice listening to a person talk about something they knew a lot about, it half-successfully brought his attention away from a more pressing subject. In the meantime the crystals did their work, and after about five minutes he could say most of the pain and general gogginess went away.

"So they basically heal you, that's what you're saying," he summed up. The mage might have been in a process of drawing a diagram or two, it was hard to tell from the ground.

Niall looked at him like you'd look at a lesser creature unable to understand basic concepts. Harvey's lips quirked, he didn't mind. At last the mage breathed a sigh of resignation. "I guess you could say that," he capitulated. "But only if you widen the definition." Then he sent Harvey a more inquisitive look and the rogue braced himself in return. It was about time they stopped beating around the bush.

"Before you lost consciousness, you said Wynne did this to you. It's not true, is it?"

The rogue hesitated, his hand scratching at his chest. "Not all of it." The details of his last attempt returned while he was resting, regrettably. "I screwed things up with Wynne," he confessed, not meeting the mage's eyes. This time Niall didn't stop him when he tried sitting up, and the crystals tumbled around him, their shine not as bright and clear as before.

"Are you sure that was the Senior Enchanter?" Niall emphasized the word *senior*, as if the thought of the stately old woman purposefully hurting a person was beyond comprehension. Harvey didn't blame him, if he wasn't there when everything went south, he'd most likely also arc an eyebrow.

"It was her. And I might have deserved it, for being a fool," he admitted. "I thought... I found her, I sneaked inside her Nightmare when the demon wasn't looking. Big, horned thing, I wouldn't try taking it on on my good day. I figured, I didn't have much time to get her out of there before it returned. I was too insistent."

Niall inched a bit closer. "She didn't recognize you?"

The rogue shook his head. "She did. But she dreamed she was grieving the victims of the Tower, and I told her it wasn't real. I thought if I told her the truth, she'd wake up. But..." He rubbed his face a couple of times, frustrated. "Our failure was a lie, but her grief... it wasn't. I only made her angry."

"Enchanter Wynne, she... not many are as protective of the Circle as she is."

"And I should've told her she had many others left to save, instead of... no matter." He trailed off. *The fabric of her robe was course and thick under his touch as he grasped her sleeve, a fine Fereldan wool. She wasn't coming. He panicked and grabbed her, pulling towards the edge of the dream. He recalled the wild look in her eyes, wrinkles deepening, the moment he remembered he was dealing with a person who was for all intents and purposes...dreaming.*

How many things could go wrong during a rescue mission? Apparently one was enough. "I wanted to pull her out, by force if necessary" --he gave the mage an apologetic shrug-- "and she pushed me out of her nightmare. With an earth-fist." *Square in the chest, the shock of being so offhandedly dismissed stung more than the impact itself. And then...*  

"The Ogre...I don't know how it knew I was trespassing, but it knew. It got to me before I could go
in again. I almost didn't make it." Harvey shuddered again and looked at Niall with frustration. "I was so close."

"But you could find her again, if you wanted to?" the mage asked. Harvey was afraid the news of his failure would throw him into a pit of despair again--this time around he was glad to be wrong.

"Of course, the issue is if she even considers leaving with me in the first place! I got off easy." This he was sure of.

Niall was pacing again, thinking. It was one of the reasons Harvey decided to share the story, beyond the fact that misery loves company--he could use additional insight. "The way the nightmares work, she might even not remember you visited her before."

Harvey's mouth opened and closed a few times, not sure whether to confirm or deny the idea. But he couldn't know for sure. His own nightmare was an endless loop, if anybody disturbed him during, he didn't recall. Finally he shook his head. "The Ogre will remember, now that it knows I'm out there. It'll be some time before it lets its guard down again."

"I recall you having more conviction before."

"I really don't like ogres, it's not a long story." He half-heartedly shot back. "I want to get her out of there as much as you do. It's just so infuriating, slipping up so close to your goal..."

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Niall replied blankly.

Harvey looked up at him. Out of everybody, Niall would be the one person able to relate with his frustration, having been captured right after retrieving the Litany of Adralla. Harvey felt childish all of a sudden, maybe he really thought it would be that easy. He just wasn't used to having to succeed, that was it. He sometimes wondered if life spoiled him, despite everything, and maybe it had. There were always options before, even if something didn't go in his favor--he didn't take to the sword, he could substitute with daggers. He didn't care for the matters of the teyrnir, he could traverse it instead, hone his hunting skills or just get lost on the coastline. He didn't have to succeed at anything, not really, not until he wanted to get his family away from Howe's men. Then he failed.

"I'll... try again." He said finally. "And you'll get your chance with the Litany, when we get out of here."

The mage nodded slowly, pensive, but said nothing. Maybe he wasn't as confident about Harvey's capabilities anymore.

The light above drew his attention. The wisp was resting atop of the pillar, listening to the conversation. The rogue noticed it and blew air out of the corner of his mouth, trying to disregard everything his mother taught him about manners. Finally he got up, wobbly, and approached it.

"You tried to help. Thank you." He wasn't sure what else to say. Who knew what the spirit really wanted, but a bit of acknowledgment won't hurt. It made him feel a bit better at least--the wisp delivered a perfect setup, it was the rogue who blew the punchline. It was an apology as much as it was thanks, if the spirit even cared about these kind of things.

The wisp rose a foot above the pillar, than quickly came back down, again, and again, as if jumping up and down. The motion seemed... angry.

"And I have no idea what that means," the rogue lied.
It was at that point when Harvey realized that Niall's little island wasn't exactly the same as he left it not that long ago. He was surprised to see a new addition—a faint shimmer adorned the inner side of one of the tree-mushrooms, where a mundane patch of bark used to be. It was calling out to him. His eyes were either still seeing things or... "There's a door here."

"There are a few doors here." Niall replied carefully. He was looking directly at Harvey, and not in the direction he was pointing. He shook his head. "Maybe I'll go and find more of those Fade crystals."

"I mean it, I'm not insane." He carefully approached the pale white glow. "I..." he paused. "I met someone who told me I would be able see the unseen." And he wasn't lying, who would have thought...

The mage followed, standing a few feet behind the rogue. "I can't see anything."

Harvey hesitated, wondering how to prove to Niall—and himself—it wasn't just a part of his concussion. He let his fingers glide on the surface of the light, and experienced the familiar tingling of a portal. Slowly he submerged his whole hand inside the magical gate, which in Niall's perspective must have looked as if he simply squeezed his hand inside solid bark.

"You... are not lying."

This changed things quite a bit. It provided him with possibilities he was deprived of before. This struck a chord in the back of his head...his escape from the ogre was frantic, and he paid more attention not to trip over anything or not to end up cornered, because that would be the end of him. But between trying not to get hit, and getting violently smacked against a wall twice anyways, before he managed to get away, Harvey didn't recall changing into a rat. Which was strange, because that was the route he took to get there in the first place. This type of shimmering door, yes, he had encountered it before.

Unbeknownst to Harvey, instead of looking for the portal, Niall was now studying him with worry. "Are you alright?" He asked.

The rogue gave him a distracted look. "I think so. Why?"

"Your teeth are chattering."

It gave Harvey a pause, wherein he simply considered brushing this off. But Niall was right about the teeth. The rogue finally realized he was also shivering slightly, his body trying to keep warm but not quite getting there. With morbid curiosity he probed. "It's gotten quite cold, hasn't it?"

The troubled expression on the mage's face told him more than he needed to know. And then he realized the chill he felt was accompanying him ever since the templar. He took it for the leftover frostbite he experienced in that dark room, but at this point it should have dissipated, especially after the chase the horned ogre gave him. And then he considered the snow in that cellar and the frozen figures, alive, but not really.

"What will you do? Will you go back for Enchanter Wynne?"

"I... Not yet." The new door was also tempting, but the probability of one of his friends being kept in the Raw Fade wasn't too high. He suspected he was here because he was supposed to be the least troublesome. "The demon guarding her will be on high alert for a while. I doubt I would be able sneak in again, not so soon."
He made a decision, nodding toward the pillar. "First I want to check the other island again."

"The dead end?"

"Maybe not anymore." He shivered and rubbed his hands in an attempt to warm himself up. "The sooner I find one of my friends, the better." He glanced at the ground. "Those fade crystals, they are useful. You said you didn't have any more of them?"

Niall nodded slowly. "I know where to find them, but they don't last long after you break them off away from the matrix. I don't keep any on me, I didn't think there would be any point."

"Show me where."

>>X<<

The floor seemed as silent and still as Harvey left it. Maybe it would've been wiser to sacrifice at least a few minutes to observe if there wasn't any newcomer lurking about, but he couldn't take it anymore. The rogue bee-lined towards an iron brazier standing in the corner of the chamber and reached his hands above the crackling coals. Starving for heat, he was all too eager to finally get rid of the cold stiffness infecting him more and more with each passing minute. And it did help, a little--the fire took the edge off, even if the rogue hoped for more. The embers felt warm, not scorching, so he inched his palms closer to the coals, as close as he dared, afraid the fire would burn his skin no matter how measly the heat seemed. It still felt lukewarm at best. Harvey briefly wondered if it was the nature if this place or was it just him, but he was afraid he already knew the answer. The desperate thought of submerging his hands beneath the sizzle crossed his mind, tempting, but quickly dismissed.

And even that minor relief was fleeting. The warmth he so desperately acquired quickly dissipated the moment he moved away from the brazier - the biting cold was again spreading between his bones uninvited, as if emerging from deeper within his own body, so deep an ordinary source of heat couldn't compete. Makerdammit. I should go. And he really wanted to, he was already a few steps away - but after a short inner struggle, like a drowning person grasping for a rope he couldn't help but return to the fire, and let the burning coals do their feeble work yet again. He knew that sooner or later, he'd have to leave. But just a few moments more. Until it's no longer terrible.

It wasn't worth it--he thought--taking a detour to find the few fade crystals now clattering his left pocket. They did nothing for his mysterious new ailment, and it was only progressively getting worse. And Niall said they wouldn't last longer than a few hours - if that was any indication, a quick look confirmed they already lost much of their shine. But Harvey Cousland always had to be prepared, didn't he? He grit his teeth. He cursed the templar, or whatever that thing was. He gave him the power to see invisible doors, was this supposed to be the price? So damn cold, he shivered. His skin seemed paler than he remembered, it felt as if he'd never feel warm again.

But he really, really needed to go. He braced himself, and on the count of ten he let go of the brazier, turned around and forcefully walked away. He hoped this particular island was as condensed as he thought it was.

Harvey have been here a few times before--it was night and day, compared to the never-ending corridors and darkspawn lurking behind every corner. But it was also why he didn't find a reason to linger.

So ordinary, like the reflection of his own room which was a memory from a life so familiar and now
gone, this particular nightmare was a replica of what the Circle Tower floor must have looked like, before the demons came and repainted everything with rubble and gore. The details were imperfect, bookcases floating a few inches above the floor, in severe cases at inexplicable angles. But there were books on the shelves, and candles and braziers were blazing with light - even if they seemed to be burning on an endless amount of fuel. Certainly more cozy than the darkspawn infested maze. Or so he thought.

The first and only people Harvey encountered in this place tore each other to shreds with spells, like rabid dogs going for each others' throats. He watched in horror, hidden behind a door, the various projectiles of fire, ice and stone thrown around with dismissive arrogance, until one of the mages chose a much bigger spell, a fireball, which in a room that couldn't be more than ten feet across solved the dispute permanently. When the sounds of carnage finally died down and only the caster himself remained, writhing on the floor engulfed in flames, the rogue ended his suffering with a dagger to the heart, a more merciful death considering what was left of his body.

Niall told him about mages going insane and nothing could've painted a clearer picture. Hell took many forms.

He passed the room where charred corpses now mingled their dust with wood and paper ash. He only stumbled into two other occupants--two shades haunting the adjacent study room. They didn't give him too much trouble and he disposed of them quickly. And that was it, the island has stood empty ever since, a couple of rooms and a part of a corridor, supposedly leading somewhere, but quickly reaching a dead end. He looked for hidden passages the first time he got here, but all the rat holes available connected only the rooms within the confined space. That's why he focused his attention on the maze; at least he wasn't stuck pacing back and forth, looking for a passage that wasn't there. He checked in once or twice, only to confirm nothing has changed.

There was a passage now, a shimmering outline of a door at the end of a gloomy, unlit hallway. It used to be an empty wall, Harvey recalled numbly. And now it led to another, possibly crazier place. He approached, hesitating whether to report the finding to Niall or not. But there was no reason to, save for his own peace of mind - the mage wouldn't pursue even through a door that he could see, and Harvey didn't expect him to.

The wisp didn't wait for him to make up his mind, and was through the gate as soon as it came to view. *What was the worst thing that could happen, everything was already terrible.* He was out of options. He followed, the rush engulfing him as he went in, expecting to see a different scenery.

Harvey emerged on the other side, dagger in one hand, ready to be assaulted by any sort of creature. It always worried him, that second or two after the jump. No matter how much he prepared himself, it always took a moment to shake off the dizziness and confusion. He was spared, this time there was nobody on this side of the hall except for him, and the spirit who was already ahead and disappearing round the corner. *He seems grumpier than usual,* he noted. The right and left wall curved slightly in one direction, a sign he was continuing along the circumference of a circle. A continuation of the floor, then. Good. He hoped the nightmare would stay as true to the real world as possible, he didn't have time to get lost.

That's when he heard it, murmurs of quiet human voices echoing from somewhere further away, bits of distorted words he couldn't quite make out. Goosebumps bloomed all over his back - or maybe that was just the cold. With demons crawling all over the place, one wouldn't normally want to attract any attention. If someone could afford a luxury of loud conversation, then it either meant they were luring others in, or were powerful enough not to care. *Or stupid enough not to care* - but for as long as Niall said he'd been stuck here, the rogue figured this particular sort would be more or less extinct at this point.
Either way he had to be careful.

He crept forward, passing crystals attached to the inner wall every ten feet or so. They gave off a bit of pink-ish light, providing him with enough shadows to hide in. At the end of the hall he entered another small chamber, empty save for a wall of fire towering across its entire length and a few fireplaces burning on the far wall. The voices were coming from the room beyond this one. It filled him both with hope and dread.

He changed into a rat and cleared the fire by a hair's breadth. The cold assaulted him with doubled strength when he was climbing up the wall and he dropped the transformation as soon as he was in the clear. He ended on the ground, shivering. *That's not a good idea anymore.* He instinctively turned around to pat down the smoldering rag of a cloak, but the embers died down by themselves killed by the layer of frost now covering most of his attire. When he finally comprehended what he was looking at he picked at the white layer and brushed it off with anger. *Not yet.* The heat of the fire behind him, he almost couldn't feel it anymore.

*Don't think about it, just go.* He stumbled towards what looked like an entrance to a dining hall, joining the wisp who was already waiting there. Not giving the three hearths a second glance, he quietly approached the make-shift barricade, half certain everybody and their mother could hear the creaking of his joints. *Focus.* It was barred with scraps of chairs, tables and wooden planks, not completely obscuring the opening, but making sure not more than one person could enter at once. A safety measure, he guessed, his teeth chattering quietly. He didn't like it one bit. One person in, one person out. He'd be a moving target the moment he entered.

But it gave him an unexpected advantage; there was enough space to peak through without giving himself away. He found a crack that presented the best view of the room, and looked through it, carefully counting silhouettes. There were six people, maybe seven. The dining room was the vastest chamber he came across so far, and the furthest part of it was obscured greatly by the clutter strewn around on the ground. Harvey noted that fact under 'useful'. There were two heavy wooden tables, perfect for serving a decent number of people at once. One was still standing, albeit diagonally to the wall for some reason. The second one was in pieces, mostly burned down, laying on its side. Harvey also counted a few charred benches and pieces of cupboards - also in various states of disarray. Everything was peppered with pieces of plates and silverware. It looked very much like a battlefield took place here at one point. Against whom?

How to tell if someone was insane just by looking at them wasn't among the skills a young noble man would be taught as curriculum. Harvey observed intently--he had an option to reveal himself, and it would either gain him allies or a swift and painful death. Unfortunately there was also a possibility someone in there would maybe be able to help him, and the temptation was so strong he knew he had to decide quickly, before all of his common sense froze over with the rest of him. He grit his teeth tightly to not blow his cover. *Good guys or bad guys?* The two men closest to him were sitting on a piece of bench, the one on the right was swaying slightly. Harvey couldn't see his face. The other one was carving the wood of a nearby table with a knife. They could be bored out of their minds as far as he could tell. The pair on the far side, a woman and a man... he strained his eyes and gave up, they were too far for him to tell what they were doing. The most relevant in rogue's eyes was the pair standing more or less in the middle of the chamber, a bit to the side, where he could see them best. After a minute or two he could tell they were caught in a contest of sorts, aiming their spells at a target suspended at the highest point of the dining hall.

Harvey followed their line of sight, glancing upward. The angle wasn't the greatest - he had to find another crack to get a better look... There. Fixed with ropes to another bench, which was in turn vertically propped against a wall, was a sorry remainder of corpse. Man or a woman, Harvey couldn't tell, all the tell-tale signs either missing, or disfigured. Harvey watched as the shorter, light-
haired mage took three steps back and launched a firebolt at the target. It hit, barely grazing the side of the torso, leaving a black mark behind—a decent hit, but definitely not a feat deserving the triumphant howl from the person who fired it.

Alright, maybe they hung it there after the person died. But a heavy weight was already settling inside of his stomach. Now it was the other man's turn. The second contender was a middle aged elf with short brown hair and less confident demeanor. He took the same position as his companion before. Lightning energy crackled between his fingers when he pointed towards the corpse, shooting point blank. The right shoulder of the target exploded in the shower of body chunks and gore. There was no shout of triumph from this one--on the contrary, the mage shrank somewhat, casting glances towards his companion. The firemage growled and pushed his friend aside, setting his robe on fire with a torrent of sparks. The elf wailed and started beating the small flames down--they died after a few frantic moments. The firemage was again aiming at the corpse, as if nothing happened.

He had seen enough. He was giving these people a wide berth, Harvey decided, the short display enough to silence his denial. The alternate plan, then.

The room was cluttered enough they wouldn't see a small rat sneaking through - he definitely had experience clearing more risky areas. In his current state it was going to feel terrible, but he was positive he could make it. There was an exit on the other side of the dining hall, it wasn't unreachable if he was smart about it. Harvey paused when he noticed his own breath, and wondered how long it had been visible in the air and how bad of a sign was it. That might've been the reason why he didn't pay attention when the crackling noise of the flames in one of the hearths became louder than it should.

Air escaped his lungs, a white cloud of cold vapor, when the rage demon struck him from behind. It flung him towards the entrance through all layers of the makeshift barrage. He landed in the dining hall face first, richer about three splinters, six pair of eyes now on him.

Alistair would say something clever right now. Even Amell would manage something. But the noble was too cold and too dumbstruck to be witty, his mouth opened and closed and no words came out--instead he bolted straight towards the other side of the room, before the mages could react. The wisp was way ahead of him, already half-way through. Smartass.

He bounced off of the bench, passing the two mages who were sitting on it--the one who was swaying slightly, Harvey now could see half of his face was gone revealing charred tissue beneath. Lovely. The one with the knife was more alert and swung towards his leg, but Harvey was faster. He kicked off the edge of the table, leaving the confused duo to deal with the rage demon who at that point barged in through the rest of the barricade.

The smell of ozone in the air was his only warning. A lightning bolt hit the surface of the table with a loud crack, splintering the wood and leaving a long black gash. The brown-haired elf was aiming at him, and Harvey incredulously felt betrayed. But that was on him, feeling bad for the underdog. He was just lucky the mage wasn't as skilled at aiming at moving targets. He responded with a projectile on his own, grabbing a throwing dagger and sending it towards the mage. Or he attempted to; the handle slipped out of stiff fingers and disappeared somewhere to the side. He stared at his hand for a second as if it didn't belong to him, then towards the exit with a bit of panic. If he could only make it to the other side and gain some distance...

He caught a red bead of light with the corner of his eye and he knew he was in trouble. He ducked and almost made it towards the cover of the second table before the fireball exploded, the impact catching him mid-air and flinging him against the inner wall.

He was out of it for a second or two, his head was hurting as if it was splitting in half, not to mention
the terrible ringing in his ears. Not much heat, though. When he came to, the pair who was having the contest before were already flanking him, passing the clutter to get closer. He could hear shouting near the entrance—the mages were occupied fighting the rage demon, a bright side to all this mess. The remaining two on the far end of the hall, nearest the exit, the rogue wasn't sure about. They were staying out of the fight so far, observing.

He was still on the floor when the two shadows came over him, one on the right, one of the left of him. There was palpable blood-lust in both men's expressions. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see the exit, and the faint light of the wisp disappearing into another hallway. Thirty, maybe forty feet.

He was so damn cold. But the people in here weren't thinking straight, and he wasn't there yet. Harvey's lips curled with his best attempt at jeer. Looking right into the fire-mage's eyes, he nodded towards his friend. "He should do it, he saw me first."

The mage narrowed his eyes, and shot a challenging glance towards his companion, who in turn looked terrified. Two seconds at best, but it was enough. Harvey's fist connected with the man's jaw, a solid punch the rogue didn't feel as much as he should. He caught the man's hair praying to the Maker his hands would cooperate, and they did. The rogue maneuvered the firemage into a human shield, and held a dagger close to his neck, drawing a few droplets of blood.

"I only want to pass. Let me go and I won't kill him."

The answer was swift, two magic bolts hit the mage's chest, the man's body violently arcing in pain. The rogue almost released him in surprise. He counted on a hostage, not an actual shield. But he quickly fixed his grip, the dagger pushing tighter against the mage's neck—the man didn't put too much of a fight anymore. Harvey turned his back towards the wall to shield himself better and get his bearings. The first bolt came from the lightning mage, and a second from the woman, her jagged iron staff glowing slightly. She was now also slowly approaching, most likely attempting to block his way out. The rogue could see that the last silhouette he counted as a person was a walking corpse clad in mage robes, shambling after the mage woman like a bodyguard. Harvey expected at least a bit of hesitation, if not concern from the group. But the expressions on their faces were of predators and not normal people.

Thirty feet. "You people are fucking insane," the rogue hissed through clenched teeth, and kicked his hostage right into the arms of the one who flanked him earlier. The man stumbled, disappearing under the weight of the half conscious body.

Harvey bolted towards the exit. His saw it coming, but he couldn't help but stumble when his back suddenly exploded in pain, a magic missile hitting him right between the shoulder blades. He lost a step but managed to keep going, grasping for that threshold—out of the room and into the hallway. He wasn't stupid enough to hope that with the loss of visuals the group will also lose interest, but he'd at least be more difficult to target.
Harvey stumbled along the curve of the floor, legs stubbornly refusing the urgent nudging to go faster. Cursing, the rogue steered closer to the inner wall. He gripped a protruding piece of stonework and pushed his body forward, helping the pace. It granted him a short leap, a few steps that weren't as painfully sluggish as before. He gripped the wall again. He must've been hit with a spell--as if through a fog he could remember Amell draining her opponents with magic. That must be what was happening to him now. It wasn't the cold stiffening up his joints, making it feel like he was lifting blocks of ice inside his boots. It wasn't.

The rogue ducked, startled, when an arrow of flame hit the wall behind him, shattering into a myriad of sparks. It missed, but gave him a spook all the same. His pursuers were keeping a steady pace, like a group of cats playing with a mouse. Hard as he tried to ignore it, the comparison was impossible to avoid. Otherwise he couldn't think of one reason why they wouldn't have caught up to him by now. The woman laughed behind him, calling out in cooing words. Harvey refused to listen. He gripped for the wall and pushed again.

Suddenly, the main corridor branched off into a side chamber to his left, a promise of safe haven and variety of hiding places. To the rogue's dismay, the tiny light he's been following till now ignored the entrance and continued straight on. With a briefest hint of hesitation the rogue followed, casting a longing glance in the direction of the chamber as he went by. No, no, that was right, he couldn't wait it out for Maker only knew how long. If he was correct, if his body was--he allowed the thought--freezing to death, he didn't know what turning into a rat would do in his condition. The image of a furry icicle stuck between the books like some kind of grotesque bookmark was even worse than getting splattered by the oversized foot of an Ogre.

He had to trust that if the wisp was clever enough to get itself out of trouble every time, then by extension it could get him out of trouble as well. I really hope you know where you're going.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of effort, the corridor came to an end with a single door. The glow of the spirit disappeared behind the doorframe, and Harvey willed himself to conquer the last stretch of the way.

He was holding the handle when the female mage came into view and cooed after him again. "Leaving so soon? But we rarely have guests!" She laughed, be it at her own cliched spiel or because she was insane, Harvey didn't care. She was dragging her staff like a club behind her, the focus on the end scraping the floor. It made an ungodly screech he couldn't help but cringe away from. She and her friends were leisurely walking towards him, as if no matter what he did getting away wasn't even on the table.

Harvey ran inside the room, mouthed "no thanks" towards her deranged grin, and shut the door behind him. His trembling hands fumbled uselessly with a large wooden bar, before he simply caught it between his wrists and pushed, locking the door. A few wooden splinters embedded themselves in his flesh in the process, which he saw more than felt.

He faced the room, already prepared not to see another entrance, and still feeling like a cornered animal when it proved to be the case. He quickly scanned what turned out to be a small book storage, and without a moment to spare, frantically started rummaging through the chamber. The walls on the left and the right, as well as in front of him, were all occupied by tall bookcases, sparse tomes gracing the shelves here and there. They weren't what he was looking for. He went for the right corner, glancing under the floating furniture, but it wasn't there. He moved onto the left one, the shelf actually standing firmly on the ground. When it moved slightly when he pushed it, he thought
he found his prize. The floor beneath was spotless.

A polite knock on the door momentarily pulled him out of his trance. The short, feminine "may I come in" that came after, threw him right back to work. Where the void is it?! Where IS IT?! He reached down and started throwing the sparse clutter around in search of fissures inside the pavement. For rat holes. Nothing. One way in, one way out.

The voices were at the other side of the door, speaking in muffled tones.

Harvey picked up a bunch of papers and threw them at the floating ball of light. They dispersed before reaching the target, as pathetically as he felt. "You brought me t-o a dead end?!" he stammered in disbelief. The spirit circled the small chamber slowly, deaf to his accusations, then perched on one of the books on a shelf in front of the door.

He didn't understand. "But you'll... die?" It came out more like a question, and now the rogue wasn't so sure the mages would even pay attention to a random wisp. Why would it run to a safe place if it wasn't even their target? He'd messed up. Harvey plopped on the floor, burying his head in his hands. It was his decision to follow, and he didn't have much of a choice. Maybe he wouldn't be gambling with his life if he wasn't so damn cold, it was getting hard to focus. He wasn't at his best. The frost covered his clothes and armor all over with a thin layer, and when he angrily cleaned it off, he could see it already forming back. It willed him to get back up again-- his legs already felt heavy, who was to say he wouldn't get stuck.

The conversation outside became a little more impatient. The hinges creaked in protest when a spell hit the wood with thunderous force. Harvey winced, taking a step back. But the door held strong, and unless there was a way to magically open it, he'll have a few more moments to think about his own mortality. He stiffened, expecting to hear another impact, but it never came. His puzzlement quickly turned to dread when he noticed faint wisps of smoke sneaking through the cracks, quickly filling the small space with their presence. They set the door on fire. That works, too.

The air inside the storage quickly became gray. Harvey blankly watched the flames lick the edges of the wood. Why was this even happening. Why was he here. He was supposed to get to safety, not suffocate in a small room. The wisp was still waiting on a perch, unfazed. Harvey looked at it, lost. "Why are you so calm?" he rasped. The acrid air tickled his throat and he backed away instinctively, coughing. His back found the bookshelf the wisp was resting on and he leaned against it for support. To his shock, it responded with a faint sound of stone shifting against stone. He couldn't have imagined it. He turned around and gave it a hearty push. The bookcase and part of the wall gave in slightly, moving to the side, revealing a hidden entrance. A waft of fresh air hit his face and he gave the spirit a look of relief mixed with annoyance. "You could've been more clear about this." He hastily stumbled in, not bothering to fully open the passage, and for a moment fumbled in the dark for a handle to close it behind him.

When his eyes got used to the darkness, he was standing on the top of a narrow, stone staircase, leading down in a curved slope. Propping himself against a wall, he begun a slow decline, carefully setting his feet upon dimly lit steps. The occasional crystal embedded into the wall gave enough of pinkish light to see where he was going, but they were useless for anything else. He'd seen a few of those before, he remembered, but here, in a confined space, they somehow became more creepy. His jaw was starting to hurt from clenching his teeth, but it was the only thing he could do to keep them from chattering.

The wisp was ahead of him yet again, the bluish light quickly disappearing below, away from his line of sight. Irritating, but he had no more strength to keep up. He could only hope the spirit would wait for him downstairs.
After a few dozen steps the stairwell ended, the gloom giving into the warm light of a study room—vast and decently lit with candles and wall-torches. Harvey couldn't help the sudden wave of nostalgia. He'd not seen this particular room before, but all study rooms had a common element, even as spacious as this one. Still taking advantage of the shadows, the rogue crouched down and studied his surroundings, looking out for a familiar light, pondering on a variety of memories that resurfaced, both pleasant and otherwise. The place was familiar in a way he couldn't put a finger on, both comforting and unnerving at the same time. Maybe because it was a student's place, and not much time had passed since he himself was required to attend lessons, or was tasked with reading up on subjects meant to broaden his knowledge. Lately, he'd visited it less and less, until he became more of an infrequent guest than a student. Some people naturally gravitated towards more scholarly disciplines. He didn't hate it, but he wasn't one of them.

Even the most peaceful study had enough ambient noise to make it feel alive, with the soft rustling of turned pages, words unconsciously murmured under breath, or even soft steps of the caretaker putting the tomes back where they belong. And though from his spot on the stairwell the rogue had no clear view on the whole room, his ears picked up none of it here, and it seemed like the place was deserted. A dozen or so tables, each wide enough four people could sit together comfortably, stood paired up in groups of three, partially divided with partition walls for privacy. His eyes glanced over the fireplace on the far end of the room, then again over the tables, still covered in books, writing instruments, left not hurriedly, but still evidently being used or researched by someone.

Harvey quietly rubbed his arms to keep warm, annoyed. The Fade had finally done it. He was now as wary of empty rooms as he was of a bunch of deranged lunatics trying to kill him. Luckily, he didn't lose the wisp—the faint bluish spark emerged from under a table, and quickly made deliberate turns towards the fireplace. When it arrived there, the rogue's knuckles whitened, as he grabbed the stone to steady himself. Harvey's brain was still screaming at him that the person wasn't there the first time he looked, but he was already a few steps into the chamber, his throat tight and dry.

The man heard his awkward shuffling, but at this point the rogue was too distraught to keep quiet. The not-stranger turned away from warming his hands, looking towards the newcomer. Harvey's face paled. Bryce Cousland was smiling sternly at him. "I'm glad you finally found your way here," he said. "Don't stand there with your mouth wide open, pup. Come, warm yourself." The wisp was making slow and lazy circles above his head.

Every fiber of Harvey's being was pulled him towards the fireplace, towards his father. The man was wearing that yellow and red tunic he always wore when he received important guests. When the rogue saw it last, there was more blood on it. A lot more. It was too convenient. Too naive. "You're not him."

The older man looked him up and down, taking in his sorry condition. When he spoke there was sympathy in his voice. "You don't sound convinced."

He wasn't, Maker help him, he truly wasn't. He'd been thinking about his father constantly, ever since they talked inside his own nightmare. The details of that conversation remained fuzzy, no matter how much he tried to remember. In the end he'd written them off as trifle, a front for what he thought was his subconscious leading him towards awakening. There was doubt in him now, the evidence the help had been more literal standing right in front of him.

"He died." Harvey finally shook his head. In his own home, betrayed by his friend. "This isn't..." he looked around the study, "he couldn't be here, this isn't a real place.... I mean it is. I mean, the Fade is real, but..." Harvey realized he was starting to ramble, so he took a deep breath trying to sort out his thoughts. A cloud of vapor escaped his nose and dispersed in the air. Bryce Cousland was still there. "You're dead." He finally said. There it was, the core of what he was trying to say. There was
nothing more to add.

His father looked at him sadly. "I didn't say I wasn't. But we are all bound by duty... And this is mine."

The rogue gritted his teeth. Why wouldn't this specter just give up and go away? "You have no duty towards me!" he shot back, pushing down the feeling of remorse when his father looked visibly hurt by his words. Respond to this, show me what you really are.

The older Cousland opened his mouth, hesitated, and closed it back again. When he finally spoke, Harvey could hear regret in his voice. But also purpose. "I...know I can't change your mind. But I'm glad to have seen you, I truly am. If you wish to go, I won't stop you." Bryce faced towards the closest partition wall, and a huge hanging mirror that seemed heavily out of place burst forth with familiar light. "The way here couldn't have been easy, but you found what you were looking for."

Why was he doing this to him, why was he just standing there, by the fireplace, looking as if he did what was right, even if his ungrateful son doesn't appreciate it. Why was it so much like him?

"Was this your plan, to make me come here? Were you helping me?" It was too big for Harvey to wrap his head around - the sheer possibility made his head spin. The Chantry claimed the souls returned to the Maker's side, they didn't go to the Fade. Did they pass through the Fade? That was the problem, he didn't know. If it was part of the teachings, he hadn't paid attention. He didn't dare to step any closer to the ghost, but he didn't take any steps towards the mirror either. Not yet.

"You wanted to find your companions, didn't you?" the older Cousland replied, extending his hand towards the mirror. "One of them dreams inside. I...can't interfere directly, I couldn't free them. But I knew you'd make it."

Harvey's heart clenched even tighter and he hated it. "You're not him." His voice was weak. "Don't talk as if you are."

"It doesn't matter in the end. You're as bound by duty to see this through as I am."

"Duty?" The young noble tried to laugh, but only a short cough escaped his freezing throat. "I guess a Cousland always does their duty," he said in cracking voice, before finally he couldn't take it anymore. He shook his head. "Father, I'm so tired. So cold. I don't think I can go any further."

There was no judgment in his father's expression, just a bit of fatherly disdain. Harvey welcomed it like a long forgotten book you pick up by accident. "You've done your best. We all carry our burdens until we can't anymore. But there always has to be someone you can pass your torch to. Go to your friend."

Harvey broke down. Myriads of thoughts and wishes he wanted to speak raced through his head, each and every one of them pulling in its own direction, in result leaving him with no coherent reply. After all this wasn't his father. It might be. He might have sprouted roots at this point, he couldn't move on until he finds out. Until he knows for sure.

The older Cousland turned towards the fire and with a help of a poker fixed the blazing logs so they'd burn more efficiently, a small habit Harvey has seen many, many times. He gestured invitingly, making a place for him by his side. Harvey just couldn't.

Bryce put the tool back on the stand. "You were always stubborn, like your mother," he scoffed at him, an expression quickly broken by a fond smile. He slowly started walking towards the rogue.
Harvey just wanted to see his father's face up close, see through the lie, if there was one. He'd let him take just one more step, then he'd surely see the truth. He could run away if he had to, through the portal. The rogue wasn't sure how it exactly happened, but step after step the older Cousland approached, until he was standing right in front of him, the same tired, but not unkind face staring at him with blue eyes. The rogue instinctively escaped with his gaze.

A hand touched his head and ruffled his hair affectionately. "You did well."

"Father, I'm so sorry, I..."

The hand gently patted him on the cheek, then seamlessly slid down, resting on his neck. When the second one joined it on the other side, it was too late to do anything.

With a choking sound, he was lifted up in the air with inhuman strength.

His trachea crunched under the strain. Harvey struggled, clawing at the squeezing hands, more frantically as the disbelief was quickly replaced by the need for air. When he kicked the table he finally came to his senses and instead of thrashing wildly he delivered a few well aimed kicks. All of them hit their mark, but didn't manage to change his assailant's expression from the sort of pleased curiosity that made Harvey want to throw up.

He couldn't breathe. Giving up on his grip, Harvey's fists wallop on the man's arms again and again. And as his consciousness was fading away, the light was the first thing to go. The library disappeared from his perception, until only he and the man remained. Soon even the vision of his father faded away. The world was shrinking, and he was shrinking away with it, piece by piece, until only the tingling in the back of his neck remained.

The specter of Bryce was choking the light out of his son, when the victim suddenly shrunk in size, and before he managed to adjust his grip, the rat squeezed out of his hands, and almost drunkenly stumbled across the floor, hitting the nearest wall with a hard splat. It instantaneously resumed human form--bleeding from his forehead, and covered in frost from head to toe, Harvey took starved gulps of air.

He had to get up and run, but his legs wouldn't listen. The transformation had stolen what little strength he had left. Still breathing hard, Harvey plopped down and scrambled against the wall, facing his attacker. He watched in horror as his father's features softened, his form starting to shift. The transformation was smooth, but regained coherency only when it ended, everything in-between being an amalgamation of male and female features, violet skin and noble clothing, horns and gray hair.

*I don't have any luck with these.* The cold took everything away, and the rogue didn't have it in him to feel angry at himself for falling for the trap. When a familiar wisp floated down gently and hovered comfortably above the Desire demon's shoulder, there was only numbness left.

Harvey watched her cup the small spirit between her palms. She pursed her lips, bemused. "You are a new one. But you've brought me a great gift. You'll be rewarded, be patient." Then, she dismissed the creature with a wave of her hand. The wisp disappeared between the tables, out of Harvey's sight. Out of his life. "As for you, ser cheater, whatever are we going to do with you?" She sauntered towards him and crouched down a few feet away, fascinated by his inability to move. Her pink skin glowed with inner light, adding to her unearthly appearance. "You took what you wished for, and yet you refuse to give me what I want. You're ruining my game!" she said with reproach.

When he just stared at her she gleefully poked his leg. Harvey wished he could poke her back with a dagger. His hands were cold and rigid, when he willed them to move they refused. There wasn't
enough strength in his legs to get up, and he couldn't say he even felt her touching him. He wasn't
going anywhere, he might as well bite. "Your game?" he parroted back at her. He had to figure out
how to get away, somehow.

"Yes!" she beamed. "My servants bring me guests, those who got away from Master Sloth. I give
them what they wish for, and in return I take their lives, so they won't bother him anymore."

Niall told him he should've left the wisp alone. Now he wished he'd listened to him. "It's a bad game
if someone doesn't even know they're playing."

She gingerly trailed her finger along his face, and the only thing he could do is turn his head away in
protest. "Oh, they all know. But they choose not to know! I can see it in their faces, I could see it in
yours. Humans are so fascinating!" Harvey couldn't tell if she was young or old, but maybe it didn't
work that way here.

He didn't grace her with a reply, because he'd have to admit she was right. Things that looked too
good to be true usually turned out to be that way. Hook, line and sinker, he thought reproachfully.
She simply gave him a bait he couldn't ignore. Maybe he had to try a different approach. "You like
games, then?"

"Oh, I do!" She smiled, showing her perfect teeth. Her canines were wonderfully elongated.

"Then how about a little game of catch and release?" he tried.

Her anger didn't waver, a terrifying, still expression, like a snake considering a mouse.

The desire demon pouted at him like a young girl. "We have agreements, we don't prey on other
islands, that would be rude!" She looked curious now, curious and a little disappointed. "You say
you saw this form before?" For a moment a shadow of his father flickered before his eyes, before
disappearing once again. Harvey tried hard to instantly forget it.

He slowly nodded his head, trying to discern her reaction. "I think so."

"That's why it flailed on the surface, ready for the taking. Unacceptable! My gifts have to be one of a
kind, and what I gave you is a copy of what you saw before." She clapped her hands, happy once
more. "It means the game is still on!"

She shot up, and again completely defying her slight built she picked him up by the front of his
armor, bringing him up to her full height. She pinned him to the wall behind him and kissed him,
long and hard. Harvey gagged, even though the only thing he could feel at this point was the
overwhelming cold. "Sweet boy. So many things to choose from you, I've not done this for a while."
She had a bit of frost on her lower lip. "You gave me a conversation, so I'll give you a choice! Wish
what you desire, and I'll grant it to you."

He wanted to throw up. "And then you'll kill me."
She nodded, the flames that were her hair flickering playfully. "Master Sloth gave me this island to play, that is only fair."

_Fucking Void._ "I wish you'd leave me alone."

Desire giggled. "Such modest dreams, and I could give so much. Think bigger! Is it the comfort of your home that you long for, or the beauty of the land that surrounds it?" she prodded. "If you didn't like hope, how about triumph!?" Her eyes blazed with inner fire, like pink stars across the black sky. "I could show you a happy ending, convince you you ran away, and saved those who depended on you." She looked at him hard. "Though yes, that might not work so well anymore."

Harvey squirmed under her grasp, nauseous she was reading him like an open book. "I don't want your lie," he answered through gritted teeth. "I don't want anything." Especially not that sorry state where he couldn't even add two and two together.

"But you have to want. The game has to conclude." She looked at him, _through him_. He tried not to meet her eyes, but it seemed she didn't need it. "Oh, there is someone! You couldn't fathom her loss. Poor boy, you buried her so deep, I couldn't see her at first. I will give her back to you, how about it? A far better gift."

She begun shifting yet again. He could recognize the green of his mother's eyes everywhere. _No._

"Let her rest," he snarled. The left arm obeyed his sheer fury and he slammed his fist into the the face of the demon, the mockery of what it was about to become. He couldn't allow it, he _wouldn't_ allow it. His family deserved better than to be dragged out of his memory like a bunch of rags to be dangled in front of him. _He_ deserved better.

It was a graze more than a punch, he was too close for any real damage. But for Harvey it counted.

The retaliation was instantaneous and he doubled over from the sheer force pushing him against the wall. The ringing in his ears returned with a vengeance. He gritted his teeth, this was it. If he'd known dying would make him feel better, he would have considered it sooner. No, that... didn't sound right, he realized. He pondered the concept over, and found it made no damn sense. The ringing in his ears...it sounded more like a scream.

He looked up, still fighting through his blurred vision, and was unable to comprehend why the desire demon wasn't in front of him, but about fifteen feet away, suspended in mid air and in what looked like a process of being torn to shreds with methodical precision. She thrashed, maybe for the first time helpless, emitting a high pitched scream mixed with sobs. He winced with no real sympathy behind it. Was this some sort of spell? Pieces of her were falling through the cage of force like gray ash, settling on the ground in small piles. When Harvey finally managed to pry his eyes away from the grotesque spectacle, he glanced about, searching for what had to be a third party, his first coherent thought being someone took advantage of her distraction to deal a deadly blow. _Did the mages find their way through the secret door?_ He stiffened, almost ready to see the woman with her terrible staff.

Nothing else disturbed the peace of the study room, candles burning steadily as they did before. There was only him and the desire demon, locked in a merciless trap. She barely made noise now, her flesh hardly resembling human shape anymore. There wasn't any blood, but Harvey dared not to look closely at her face in fear he'd see features that were supposed to become his mother's.

Then the rogue realized he was standing on his own, his legs tired, but strong enough to support him. He felt... weak, as if he ran the third of the Highever coastline by foot, but other than that the overwhelming cold was gone, as if it had never been there. He checked his hands and fingers, and
they responded properly. Relieved, he leaned against the wall, and then immediately straightened. Looking behind him, the garlands of ice were decorating the wall like a very indecisive frozen waterfall, icicles protruding in every direction out from a bare, roughly human shape. He patted the ice, it felt real enough.

The subliminal buzzing he wasn't aware of till now suddenly subsided, and the cage disappeared. The remains of the demon scattered on the floor, sizzling with a violet flame for a second or two before slowly going out. Snow and ice were slowly beginning to form over the ash when it finally dawned at him. He did that. He wasn't afflicted anymore because he somehow let out what was eating him right at her. When the final flickers of flame disappeared, the whole room rumbled in protest. Maybe the whole island did. When it ended, the silence around him wasn't as oppressive anymore, and the light changed in hue just enough to make the whole chamber seem more welcoming. Something ended, something got cut off. For the first time since he got here, Harvey felt like he achieved something substantial.

He was also spent. Harvey gingerly stepped over what was left of Desire and grabbed a chair. Seeing unseen doors, Andraste's ass. Taking a moment of pleasure from something as mundane as sitting at the table, he reached inside his pocket, pulling a handful of fade crystals. They scattered across the wooden surface, and the rogue weeded out those that were already dull and gray, which was over two thirds at this point. Beggars couldn't be choosers. Holding the few remaining shiny ones against his chest, he felt a bit of strength returning back to him in a steady torrent. He pondered on his next step, trying not to go back to the most recent events. A copy, she said. When he gets out of here he'll have enough nightmare fuel to last him a lifetime. It could wait. Absentmindedly, his right hand began drawing circles on the surface, his finger leaving behind a trail of frost - he stared at his handiwork wishing it wouldn't do that and suddenly, it stopped. With a sigh, he added this to the list of things he didn't want to deal with at the moment. There was a bit of ice left on his sleeve and he reached to swat it away, but then thought otherwise. Fine, why the Void not. Nothing would surprise him anymore, nothing.

After the crystals were depleted he finally got up, his first steps still a bit wobbly. The wisp was nowhere to be found, and now that Harvey had enough will to feel betrayed, he very much felt so. He looked around the study and then at the frozen pile of ash. Gritting his teeth he kicked it with force, watching it scatter. "I'll do the same to you, if I ever see you again. Understand?" he called out, not expecting to hear any reply. And none came.

Taking a deep breath, and approached the mirror, and stepped into his companion's nightmare.
The sharp poke to her shoulder jolted Trinne from her reverie with a yelp. "Hey!"

"Sorry." Isla's grin was far from apologetic. She held out one hand, a crown of purple and blue flowers swinging on her fingertips. "Mum sent me to find you. it's Summerday and the family should be together an' all that."

Trinne smiled sarcastically as she stood and took the flowers gingerly from her sister, setting them at a deliberately skewed angle atop her head. "Yes, lucky us, that Da and Sim made it back in time."

"Oh, don't be like that, Trinne. You know it was her turn to go with him." Isla linked her arm through Trinne's as they walked.

"And she knows I've always wanted to go to Rivain," Trinne countered. "'Sides, I'd've let her have two in a row to make up for it."

"Really?" Isla cocked a brow.

"Maybe it wouldn't have been the next two, but yeah."

"You're lucky I don't share your wanderlust," Isla teased, "or you'd have both of us to contend with, rather than just Simone."

"Yeah, lucky me," Trinne said wryly. "I'm so fortunate one of my sisters is a homebody."

"Someone has to keep Mum company and go with her to all those fancy teas."

Trinne gave a mock shudder. "I'm glad it's you and not me."

"And I'm glad we could all be together to celebrate today." Something about the words--how Isla said them, the words themselves--struck a nerve, and for the briefest second, Trinne wasn't descending a staircase in her family's home. Instead she was a gangly preteen, perched on a wide window ledge next to an equally gangly boy, watching a magnificent sunset paint the sky orange and pink and purple.

The image was gone almost as soon as it appeared. Trinne frowned in confusion, pausing and shaking her head briefly.

"You alright?" Isla asked.

"I'm fine," Trinne assured her, fixing the flower crown, which had started to slip off. The purple and blue flowers reminded her of something, but she couldn't quite remember what. So she smiled again and resumed their easy pace down the stairs.

"Don't worry," Isla said, resuming their conversation. "Da said this trip went well, so he'll probably be going back. I'm sure you'll get a chance to see Rivain."

"I'm sure you're right," Trinne conceded, winking at her sister. "Maybe I'll come back with a tattoo. Or piercing. Or both."
Isla giggled. "There are times I swear you enjoy hearing Mum's speech about being ladylike, the number of times you make the poor woman trot it out. You'd be better served coming home with a suitor."

"Ha!" Trinne covered her mouth with her free hand to muffle her laughter. "I'd send Mum into fits. You shouldn't give me ideas, Isla. When you put it like that, maybe Da's smart to keep me away. B'sides, you and I both know far as suitors go the most we can hope for is some stuffed-shirt noble we tolerate at best."

"Oh, hush. You'll get an earful from Mum and Sim both if they hear you being so cynical on Summerday," Isla murmured, pitching her voice low as they were almost to the sitting room. "Anyway, you know that's the lot of noble girls, Trinne. Unless you're expecting the Maker to drop the perfect man in your lap, like He did for Mum, you'll just have to be happy with what you get."

"I never said he had to be perfect," Trinne snarked. "I'd just prefer not a stuffed-shirt noble. But I see your point," she nodded in concession as they reached the sitting room, where their parents and Simone were waiting, all clad in bright colors.

"There you are!" Simone grinned, her own crown of yellow flowers contrasting starkly against her dark hair. "Mum refused to serve any of us until we were all here."

"Don't look at me," Isla laughed, poking Trinne's shoulder. "She's the one who was all the way up in the attic again."

"Trinne, honestly, I don't know what you find so intriguing up there," her mother commented, pouring tea. "It's just a bunch of dusty antiques from when this house was your grandmother's."

"And books, Mum. There's lots of books," Trinne reminded her, plopping three sugar cubes in her tea before she even tasted it. "Besides that, I just really like seeing all that family history."

"You planning to find a way of conversing with dear old Grandma Amell?" Simone teased, almost pointedly sipping her tea without adding anything.

"Hardly," Trinne snorted, taking a sip of her own tea and hastily adding another sugar cube. "I'd get locked up in the Gallows if I so much as tried. Only mages can do stuff like that."

"But you are a mage." The comment was quiet and confused, almost as if the speaker hadn't intended anyone other than himself to hear it.

Trinne spun around, almost dropping her teacup, flickering stone walls and untamed wild marshes blending with the sitting room walls until she focused on the interloper standing in the doorway. "No, I'm not. Think the templars would have noticed by now." I think I would have noticed by now. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Harv- Cousland." He said it almost, almost like a question; hoping she'd recognize the name.

She cocked her head, family fading briefly into the background as she gave him her attention. He did seem vaguely familiar, but in the sense where she could simply have brushed past him on the street. There wasn't really anything about him that would make him memorable; black hair, green eyes, plain features. His clothes weren't fancy enough to be Orlesian, he was too pale to be Rivaini, and the little she'd heard him speak, he definitely didn't sound Antivan. Still, for all her puzzling, there
were only so many reasons an unfamiliar man roughly her own age would show up at their house.

Especially given how hard her parents (Mum, particularly) had been pushing her to 'settle down' recently. Still, Summerday was an important holiday to their family; one they usually celebrated just the five of them. Trinne couldn't believe they'd do something as blatant as invite a suitor today, but when she turned to ask, her parents and sisters were gone. She hadn't even heard them leave. Her conversation with Isla sprung to mind, and suddenly part of her wondered.

"Do you... know who I am?" Cousland asked hesitantly, breaking her chain of thought. He shifted his stance and fiddled nervously with the cuff of one sleeve. The light played across his shirt as he did, highlighting the stylized mabari embroidery near the shoulders.

"Given that my family quit the room to leave us alone, I'm going to guess maybe a suitor?" Trinne tossed back irritably, not waiting for his confirmation before she rolled on. "Maker, how desperate are my parents? Are they so convinced no one in Kirkwall will have me that they've resorted to bringing in a Fereldan dog lord?" She caught the muscle that twitched in his jaw but pretended she hadn't as she whirled toward the door to call for Da. She couldn't believe he'd done this to her; he was supposed to be on her side-

"Trinne, wait." He moved to grab her wrist, caught himself with a wince, and stopped just shy of making contact.

"Why should I?" she huffed, continuing her path to the door. "Da!" She wanted answers, yes, but she'd damn sure get them from her father over whoever this was supposed to be. "And here I thought they'd eased up..." she muttered, feeling betrayed.

"Would you just-" Cousland cut himself off with an irritated sigh. "I'm not here as a suitor, Trinne!"

"Then how the blazes do you know my name?" she demanded, crossing her arms.

"Because we kn- Because I've been looking for you," he said, absently flexing the fingers of one hand. She wondered if he even realized he was doing it as she stared him in the eye. The motion did jog a memory, so faint she couldn't grasp it, but there. 'You could have hit me!'

"Again, why?" Trinne asked, slowly sliding from suspicion to curiosity, but still keeping an ear out for her parents.

"I think you can help me with... someone I'm trying to find," Cousland explained. He glanced down and curled his hand into a fist to still it.

She studied his face and raised an eyebrow. It didn't seem like he was lying. "In addition to me? How many people're you looking for?"

A faint glimmer of dry amusement flashed through his eyes. "Counting you? Three. But right now I'm only really worried about one."

"Do tell." She could humor him this much, at least.

"She's a mage. Snarky sense of humor, tends to act first think second. Adventurous. Stubborn as a mabari, which isn't always a bad thing. Pretty persuasive when she wants to be."

Trinne huffed a small laugh. "Got a better description? That could be me."
Cousland looked her square in the eye, expression serious. "There's a reason for that."

Too much blood. Her head hurt from pushing herself too far already, she hadn't really seen what happened, but at least the damn ogre was dead. Unfortunately, Cousland seemed poised to follow suit. Broken ribs, broken **everything** between his hips and his shoulders, actually, punctured lung, drowning in his own blood. She couldn't stop it. Couldn't help him. Didn't know how, because she'd decided a decade ago healing spells weren't something she'd ever need and stopped paying attention. And now someone was going to die on her as a result.

The walls seemed to warp, twisting with her gut as a small seed of doubt took root. "No."

"I know it's hard," he said, shoulders hunching slightly. "It took a bit to see though mine, too."

"What're you saying?" She hated the quaver in her voice, but couldn't stop herself from asking.

"This isn't real." Cousland's tone was apologetic--cautious?--but full of enough conviction Trinne could almost believe the walls went translucent for a second.

She slapped him. Hard enough her palm stung and his head jerked sharply to the side. "What about that, then, was that real?"

He didn't move to touch the red mark springing up on his cheek. Instead, he just stared at her a moment, head cocked as if thinking, and then, quietly, "Trinne, where's the teacup?"

It was such a deviation from their current topic it threw her off-balance. "What?"

"When I first... got here, you were holding a teacup. What did you do with it?" he elaborated patiently.

"I-" She had been, hadn't she? She didn't remember sitting it down, didn't see it on either of the small tables in the room. But it wasn't in her hand anymore, either. "It must be-"

"Is this gentleman bothering you, darling?" Mum's voice interrupted smoothly.

Trinne half-turned, gaze darting between her mother--and the rest of her family--standing near the door, even though she'd heard no footsteps and Maker knew sound carried in this house, didn't it? and Cousland. "No, he... he's not."

Unease tightened in her chest. Mum's smile was too bright. Da was too handsome. Simone and Isla moved too much in sync, like marionettes with the same puppeteer.

She looked at Cousland, nails digging into her palm. "They... They're real, though, I-I remember them."

"They are, but this isn't." He gestured at the walls around them, her dress, the flowers in her hair. "I'm sure... I'm sure wherever they are, your family loves you, but this isn't them. You're a mage. We were fighting demons in the Circle, you were..." he paused to search for the right word. "...frantic to save your home."

"*This* is her home," Isla hissed from behind Trinne. "She doesn't want to leave it."
"No, no, I didn't," Trinne mumbled softly, staring at her hands.

"Trinne..."

"Mum didn't want me to, either." "No, NO, Tristan, you can't! Don't let them take her!" "But I did. The templars made me..." She swiped away the single tear running down her cheek. "B'cause I'm a mage. They took me to the tower."

The memories came flooding back then; all the mischief and mishaps, lectures, lessons... Jowan. "I told you I met a girl. This is Lily. "My condolences, Lily." "You're so funny, Trinne." Duncan conscripting her. The Joining.

"No, Trinne, stay with us," Simone pleaded, but her eyes flashed red. "We love you."

Trinne shook her head, running one hand through her hair. The flowers dissolved into nothingness, the illusion broken. "I can't."

Ostagar. The mess that had been the tower of Ishal, Alistair's face set in grim concern. Cousland nearly died. Would have died... Flemeth and Morrigan, Lothering, the Circle.

"We were looking for Irving," she remembered. "But Uldred staged a rebellion..."

Cousland nodded. "We encountered a sloth demon. It's trying to keep us complacent... or something; I didn't entirely understand."

As explanations went, she'd heard better. But it was enough for now. "So that would make them... demons, then."

Another nod. "From what I understand, yes."

"Well." Everything in her--except the little voice at the back of her head that knew he was right--resisted as she turned so she was standing next to Cousland.

"Come now, you know you can't really hurt your family. The voice came from Da's mouth, but sounded nothing like him at all.

"No, I can't." she acknowledged, reaching for the staff she instinctively knew was on her back. "But you aren't my family, so I'll have no problem killing you." As her hand closed around her staff, the dark purple dress melted away, revealing the much more functional jerkin and trousers she was really wearing.

"Are you sure about that?" Isla taunted, sounding spot-on like her little sister. If not for her unnaturally wide grin, Trinne would have bought it hook and line. As it was, she still cast a look at Cousland, silently asking for reassurance. If she really needed any after seeing his illusive finery had also faded. The light leather armor he actually wore served to further jostle her free of the dream fog.

"They're demons, Trinne," he promised, drawing his daggers and sizing up their opponents.

"No, I know." She took a deep breath, swallowed the lump in her throat. "Just makin' sure you're ready." It was nice of him to pretend he bought it. The demons still looked like her family, so it wasn't exactly easy to summon the stonefist she flung toward "Isla".
The demon that looked like her sister screamed when the spell made contact. A high-pitched, tearing sound that hurt Trinne's head. She glanced over at Cousland and saw him wincing as well, his grip white-knuckle tight on his daggers. So she shut up not-Isla with a lightning bolt to the face.

It's not really her, it's not really her, it's not really her. Trinne held tight to the thought, ignoring the damp streaks down her face, as not-Isla slammed into what couldn't really be a wall and gathered itself with a growl. The illusory house faded after that, leaving Trinne and Cousland standing side by side on a hazy green rock, squared off against her "family". The lightning bolt had seared off half of not-Isla's face, leaving one side her sweet and cheerful baby sister while the other was the visage of a monster she'd been warned about by every teacher and textbook since she was eight. The others, however, were still near perfect mimicry of her memories as they skulked in to attack.

"Wow, they must really like me," Trinne deadpanned, trying to simultaneously hide and push down the sick feeling in her gut. "Even my real family wasn't this clingy, and Mum followed the templars halfway to the docks."

Cousland didn't say anything, but the look he gave her as he parried not-Simone's blows was almost... apologetic.

I don't need your sympathy. The barbed thought stayed in her head as arcane bolts danced from her staff towards not-Mum. Almost as if she was trying to convince herself rather than inform him. This isn't really my family. She dodged a stonefist from the demon pretending to be her mother, sniffled as she retaliated with the same spell, knocking it back and crushing one arm. It isn't.

The demon screamed in rage. "All I've ever done is love you, darling!" she wailed. Even knowing it wasn't technically true (her mother loved her, this demon didn't), the words were enough to paralyze her. Briefly. For the two seconds necessary for not-Mum to lunge forward, its remaining arm extended, fingers curved like talons.

"Trinne!" Something small and sharp glanced along the side of not-Mum's face with just enough force to tear a thin line through the illusion and throw off the demon's course. "It's not real!"

Cousland barked, recommitting his attention to not-Simone, dodging the demon's attempts to slash his face and chest until he could get his daggers back up.

"I know that!" Trinne snarled, irritation at herself bleeding into her voice. She clobbered not-Mum across the face with her staff, sending it reeling into not-Da.

"Then act like it!" He swore as he blocked not-Simone's next strike, parrying it into a slash of his own that took off the lower part of the demon's arm. "I can't fight all of them by myself!"

Something sarcastic about how he was doing fine so far floated through her mind, but Trinne nearly tripped avoiding a blindside attack from not-Isla and didn't say it. Instead she grit her teeth and spat a curse of her own as not-Isla's claws raked over her shoulder. It didn't do as much damage as it could've, thanks to the leather jerkin, but it still hurt.

A childish giggle echoed around her. "Do the lights again, Trinne! They're my favorite!"

She flinched. Even if the demon's appearance was a good guess at what Isla would look like in her late teens, just now it had sounded exactly like she did when she was five. Not real, she reminded herself firmly. She glared at the demon as lightning crackled and built once more around her hand. She released the spell toward what wasn't--it wasn't--really her sister. The lightning burned through
the center of the demon's chest and it clawed briefly at the hole as it fell. Trinne let herself smirk a little. "And that's my favorite."

There was another laugh, this one from not-Mum as the demon paused next to its fallen cohort. "Very good," it purred, a taunting grin curling its lips. Its voice was an unholy mix of her mother's and something deeper, more guttural. "Given your behavior, we were so sure that would work."

"Sorry to disappoint," Trinne snarked. She reached for the lightning again, and it came easily--so, so easily--to hand.

"Oh, you're not a disappointment, darling." The demon's grin widened. "We enjoy a challenge. And we've been so bored since Master Sloth claimed this place. If we're not doing well" --a note of something else, something familiar crept into not-Mum's voice as its appearance started to shift; green eyes fading blue and silky blonde hair turning to shaggy black-- "we can always change."

"Get out of my head," Trinne growled at the demon, a chill prickling up her spine. She had a good guess what they would go for after her family, and she didn't--

"But if fond memories won't serve to keep you out of trouble" --the familiarity increased, before the demon's pitch vanished into monotone that made Trinne's stomach lurch-- "perhaps your worst nightmares will suffice." Its transformation completed and it was no longer her mother standing in front of her, but Jowan.

Complete with a Chantry sunburst seared into his forehead.

"How does failure feel, Trinne?" he--no, it, that thing was not Jowan and never would be--asked flatly, no trace of emotion in its voice. "I don't remember..."

Her answer was a wordless shriek of rage and a lightning bolt that flared and spidered toward that damned sunburst. With her emotions such a mess, her aim was awful, and the spell barely grazed the side of its face. Trinne tightened her grip on her staff until her knuckles went white. That this thing had the gall to throw that in her face caused the exact opposite it had been trying for.

There was a gurgled screech, coupled with Cousland swearing, from off to the side, and Trinne risked a look while not-Jowan reeled. She caught the tail end of Cousland's dagger slicing through not-Simone's throat. The demon flopped back, the illusion clinging for a second before it faded. Her gaze lingered just a moment too long, and a stonefist from not-Jowan caught her in the chest and sent her sprawling.

Trinne's cry of pain was cut short when she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. The irony of the demon casting that spell while it looked like him almost made her laugh despite the bruised(please, Maker, not broken) ribs. Instead she rolled further away from it, closer to Cousland, and wiped the blood away with her wrist as she got to her feet.

"You alright?" Cousland checked, sparing a glance before he focused on the demon that looked like her father.

"Fine," Trinne hissed, her own gaze zeroed in on the creature masquerading as her best friend. Both pulled back, circling, looking for an opening, and she instinctively backed up a couple more steps until she could feel Cousland's presence no more than a couple inches behind her. "You?"

"Fine," he said tersely, eyeing the circling creatures. "You have determined demons."
She snorted. "C'mon, Cousland, didja really think my demons would be anything other than stubborn?"

He let out a sound that might have been a sharp laugh. The demons picked that moment to simultaneously lunge at them. Cousland dodged to the side and let not-Da fumble past him as Trinne hexed not-Jowan into missing her with its next attack. Maybe if she made it mad enough it would drop its disguise.

From the way it shrieked at her, that plan had potential. "Trinne, how could you?"

Maker, it sounded so perfectly like him. Her memories of her family were old. Faint. Jowan was much more recent, vibrant and close to the surface. "Stop trying to be him!" she screamed back, not caring if Cousland heard, or about her sore ribs, she didn't care, she didn't care, she didn't. care. She just wanted this thing, this monster, to stop using her best friend to get to her. Especially with the fucking Tranquil brand mocking her. "You're not Jowan, and I told you to get out of my damn head!"

She fired off a couple more arcane bolts, further angering the demon as they both hit true. It finally granted her wish as the second bolt slammed into its shoulder. All pretense of disguise melted away, revealing the demon in its full ugly glory. It gibbered and hissed, flexing its talons, and then lunged.

It was faster than Trinne expected, and she tripped when she backpedaled.

"Harvey!!" It slipped out as her back hit stone and she swung her staff up to hold the demon at bay. She didn't know why; he was plenty busy himself. But the demon was pissed and clawing at her and she couldn't think of a spell to cast-

The demon froze solid in a rush of cold and frost, the claws of one hand wrapped around her staff. Trinne wrenched the staff in a half circle, shattering the demon's arm and cracking the rest of it to get free, just in time to accept the hand up Cousland offered.

"Thanks," she grunted as the two of them got her back to her feet. His shrugged reply was lost under a shriek of rage from the other demon. It charged them, still looking like her father, and Trinne sidestepped as she spun to hit the frozen one with a stonefist spell, shattering it the rest of the way. It was weird that it had frozen, she contemplated briefly while dodging ice chunks. Ice spells were neither her favorite nor her strength, so that wasn't what she would have expected to instinctively cast. Still, it had been sloppy; trails of ice snaking across the ground almost to where Harvey stood.

She supposed it made sense. Sort of...

"He'd never've let me live that down," Trinne thought wryly, firing a lightning bolt at the remaining demon as she turned toward the rogue. The spell missed Cousland and grazed not-Da's shoulder.

The demon screeched in indignant pain and glared at her, dropping its facade. The thing was all knobby bones and ugly spines; exactly what any decent Andrastian would expect a demon to look like. It narrowed its eyes, lips drawing back in a snarled "Mine!" as it bulled past Cousland toward Trinne. The spines protruding from its shoulder caught Cousland's arm as it passed him and drew blood, but he used the momentum from the blow to pivot and sink both his daggers into its back between the shoulder blades. Whatever differences there might be between human and demon physiology, the blow was still a killing one, and the demon crashed to the ground, lifeless as the others.

In the ringing silence that followed, broken only by the pair of them catching their breath, Trinne
stood frozen, trying to process what had just happened. Before she could wrap her head around it, thank him, an urgent, tugging sensation swelled to life deep in her chest and everything started to fade, colors muting to grey. "What the bloody Void?!"

"Wait!" Cousland dropped one of his daggers in his haste to grab her hand, the clang of it hitting the ground more muffled than Trinne would have expected for something that had behaved like stone up til now.

*What's 'wait', you're the one disappearing?* Trinne kept the thought to herself and focused on holding tight to his hand. She didn't want to lose the first truly familiar face she'd seen so far. After a moment of joint struggle, the tugging sensation eased away, leaving the two of them standing together on a now-barren stretch of rock. All trace of the demons and their fight had vanished, save the scratches on Cousland's arm and her own sore ribs. She cleared her throat and glanced sidelong at her companion. "Thanks."

He shrugged, bending down to retrieve his dagger. "You're welcome. I'm... tired of doing this alone."

"This?" she parroted, fighting the urge to flex her fingers. He had a surprisingly strong grip.

"The Fade," he replied, vaguely gesturing at their surroundings.

"Oh. So you haven't found Alistair yet? Or Wynne?" she added hastily. Wouldn't want to seem like she was playing favorites.

Cousland shook his head and rubbed at his arm. "Haven't seen any sign of Alistair."

"Want me to heal that?" Trinne offered. "And what about Wynne?"

He hesitated, just long enough for her to wonder which question had given him pause. "Yes." Another beat. "To both."

"So... where is she?" She cocked her head. "Did she disappear like you almost did a minute ago?"

He shot her a strange look and shook his head again. "No."

"What, then?"

"I was, um, less persuasive with her than with you. I did the best I could," Cousland said defensively as he rubbed the back of his neck. "She didn't believe me. Maybe you'll have better luck."

Trinne snorted as she rested a tentative hand on his arm. "Yeah, 'cause she and I see eye to eye so well."

He shrugged. "You're both mages, at least. There has to be *something* you can say that I wouldn't think of."

"Maybe," she said dubiously. It was hard to imagine a world where Wynne listened to *her*, but it probably wouldn't hurt to try. This was the Fade, after all. All sorts of things worked better in the Fade than they would in real life.

Like healing. Back in the waking world, her healing abilities were fledgling and shaky, nowhere
near as good as some, like Wynne or Anders. But maybe she'd be better here. After all, the power she was drawing on was closer at hand. That would make this easier, wouldn't it?

*Only one way to find out...* she told herself, gingerly cupping her hand over the cuts on Cousland's arm and reaching for the power she'd need.

It was as if spring rain had swelled a trickling brook. A surge of magic flowed through her, her hand flaring bright with the power of it. The gashes on Cousland's arm healed as if they'd never been there.

"Whoa," Trinne muttered, blinking as her head cleared from the almost overwhelming deluge. "That was different..."

Cousland cocked his head and sent her a curious look. "What?"

"That was... way more power than I was expecting," she said. Her fingers still felt tingly. "I've never cast a healing spell that strong." She let her hand drop. "It's not even scarred. Not that that matters, I guess; we're dreaming, right? I dunno if injuries or scars we pick up here would carry over..."

He twisted to look at the spot, fingers instinctively rubbing where the gashes had been. "Thank you, all the same."

Trinne shrugged and kicked the ground. "You're welcome. It's the least I could do for you helpin' me figure my way out of that... nightmare. Maker only knows how long I would've been stuck if you hadn't come along. So thank you for that."

"You're welcome," he shrugged in turn. "We'll... we have to work together. There's some parts of this I couldn't figure out that maybe you can?"

"Yeah, you mentioned a Sloth demon, what the Void is that about?" she asked, running her fingers through her hair. Navigating the Fade with Harvey Cousland for company would not have been her first choice of how to spend her day, but since they were here and didn't have a choice, she had to admit he seemed to be handling himself alright. *Duncan was right...* "Best I understand it, we ran into a Sloth demon in the Circle," Cousland began, not looking entirely sure of himself. "It's what made us fall asleep, hence the Fade, and is trying to keep us complacent so it can leech-" "-our energy," Trinne finished with him. That did fit, with the state the Circle had been in. She'd heard what Sloth demons could do, and encountering one with everything gone to the Void made sense. "So I guess the faster we get out of here--all of us--the better?"

He nodded. "Niall said-"

"Niall's here?" she cut him off, looking around as if she expected to find the bookish mage lurking around a corner, which was silly. He would have helped.

"Not here, here," Cousland clarified. "But he is in this... section? of the Fade."

"Can you show me where?" Trinne asked eagerly. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, it's just good to hear that someone I know is okay and not... eviscerated or an abomination, y'know?"
He nodded absently, but his eyes flickered with something Trinne decided to ignore because she didn't like what it implied. "Sure. First we need..." he looked around until he found what he sought. "That." He led her over to a squared-off pillar (that she knew hadn't been there before), not much taller than the two of them, purple smoke hazing one of the inset panels. He raised one hand until it hovered less than an inch away from the purple mist, and held his other hand out to her. "This way."

With no reason to doubt him, and her curiosity starting to make a return, Trinne didn't hesitate to take his hand.
Any trepidation Trinne felt about traveling via glowing-purple-mist-Fade portal was allayed by knowing Niall waited at the other end. Which was more than a little funny; given that she and Niall had never been particularly close. She was just relieved to see someone from before.

Before walking into the nightmare that was Kinloch Hold, before the Wardens, before any of it. He might be dry and pessimistic but he was familiar, in a way Cousland wasn't. Happy as she was to see him, too. But the process of traveling via glowing purple mist Fade portal didn't take long, so she wasn't given more than a second or two to dwell on any of that. The world flipped in an almost disorienting rush as they emerged on the destination end of the portal. Cousland didn't let go of her hand until he was sure she had her balance, which Trinne appreciated.

"Oh, good, you found one," a familiar voice commented behind her in a tone of apathy broken by cheering news. There was a brief pause and then, "Trinne?"

She turned around and flashed a smile somewhere between cheesy and sheepish. "Hey, Niall. Fancy meeting you here."

Niall didn't so much as smile at the weak joke (and she was pretty sure Cousland rolled his eyes). "It's good to see you again. There were so many different rumors of why you left the Circle, we were pretty sure you'd never be back."

"Well, here I am, back to help save the day." She cocked her head, curious. "Didn't Cousland mention...?"

Niall frowned and rubbed his forehead. "He... maybe? I don't remember."

It was Trinne's turn to frown. Something was off with that. Niall had an annoyingly good memory; one of the best in the tower. "Are you alright?"

He waved her off. "I've just... been here longer. You know how the Fade can be. Did your friend catch you up?"

Trinne settled for a nod, deciding not to argue that 'teammate' would be a maybe a better label for her relationship with Harvey Cousland than 'friend'. "About the Sloth demon and everything, yes."

Niall sighed, turning to straighten a stack of books balanced on what looked like an end table but wasn't quite upon close examination. "Then you know the perception of time is warped here, and Sloth is using its victims to fuel this realm."

"Part of why we want to get out of here fast, yes." Trinne's eyes narrowed. For a second, she thought she'd seen through Niall's hand. But it passed and she returned her attention to his face. "Prob'ly my imagination, anyway. "The rest bein' we want out so we can stop Uldred an' the mages can help the Wardens."

That brought a faint smile to his face. "So that was where you went. Given that you and the Grey Warden disappeared at the same time, that was the popular theory."

"What, they didn't tell you?"

Niall shook his head. "Greagoir tried to hush it up. Something to do with joining the Wardens being seen as an honor and the circumstances of your recruitment. Wouldn't want it looking like you got
rewarded for helping a blood mage escape."

Trinne caught Cousland's mildly curious head tilt out of the corner of her eye and grimaced. Damn. At least it was better than Alistair finding out, though she wasn't sure by how much. "Yeah, well, Wardens ain't all sunshine and roses. He'd prob'ly worry less if he knew what it was like. But that's less a concern to me than getting out of here, so. Got any ideas?"

Niall shook his head, listlessly accepting the change of subject. "Harvey's the one who's been making progress. I tried, but... I could never get out. It's safer staying here anyway."

"Well, is there anything you figured out while you were here that I would maybe understand better?" She winced at her phrasing the second the words were out of her mouth. But hopefully Cousland would understand she'd meant due to being a mage, and wasn't slighting his intelligence.

"Just the concept of shaping the Fade with your will." Niall shrugged. "I did explain and he seemed to grasp it well enough" --they both glanced at the noble, who nodded absently, looking lost in thought and like he was only half-paying attention to their conversation--"But we've been learning about it practically since we learned to talk."

Trinne sighed. "So it's more a matter of me an' him talking to figure out what we wanna do next?"

This time Niall nodded. "I'm sorry I can't help more, but once I figured it was safe here, relatively, and dangerous elsewhere, I didn't see much point in trying. Unlike your friend."

Trinne pursed her lips, trying to ignore the cold knot forming in her gut. She was pretty sure she knew the other reason Niall seemed so apathetic, and she really didn't want to think about it. "I guess... Guess I'll go talk to Cousland, then."

Niall nodded and went back to his pile of books, carefully and methodically redoing the stack from the top down as if looking for a specific tome. Trinne left him to it and joined Cousland at the opposite edge of the small... island that housed their refuge.

The rogue gave her an inquiring look and she felt the defensive urge bubbling up in her chest even as, "I didn't know he was a blood mage," came tumbling out of her mouth.

Cousland frowned slightly, as if switching trains of thought. "I didn't ask, Trinne."

"I know, but..." She wasn't sure how to finish that sentence. 'I'm used to people judging' 'I need you to understand'? 'I didn't help, of course, that knowing wouldn't have changed her mind. "Whatever," she sighed instead.

This look was still questioning, but ever so slightly sympathetic. "Is that why you change the subject as soon as Alistair starts to pry?"

Trinne nodded. "Yeah, I'm not lookin' forward to him learnin' that little tidbit. You saw his reaction to learning I helped someone become an apostate. Can you imagine if he knew that someone was a blood mage, too? I'd never hear the end of it."

"He was raised in the Chantry," Cousland pointed out, his tone neither derisive nor defensive.

"I know," she sighed. "Can you... maybe not tell him? I have a sneaking suspicion it'll come out eventually, but I'd like to put that off a bit longer if I can."

He nodded. "I wasn't planning to. That's your business, far as I'm concerned. You get to decide when people learn it." He hesitated, ran one hand through his hair. "Would it have made a
difference? If you'd known?"

Trinne bit her lip, gambling how honest she wanted to be. "...No. He's my best friend, my brother, really, and I know he's a good person. Him bein' a blood mage doesn't change that." She sighed. Her thoughts on blood magic were definitely not something she wanted to discuss now. "Now that we have that out of the way, fill me in on what you know about obstacles an' stuff."

Cousland nodded. "There are other areas we can reach with that" --a gesture toward the pillar with its purple-smoke panels-- "guarded by lesser demons we'll have to defeat before we can get to Sloth, and we have to find Alistair and Wynne somewhere in there and convince them this is a dream."

"That doesn't sound too hard," Trinne said, raking hair back from her face.

He smirked almost bitterly, pulling out one of his throwing knives and twirling it. "Each of the areas has a trick to it. One's on fire, one was full of darkspawn, things like that."

"Lovely. Sounds like an adventure. How do we plan to handle all this?"

"Can we?" Cousland grimaced as he tucked the knife away. "Plan, I mean. If we want to get out of here we have to handle it, don't we?"

"Yep." Trinne mulled over his other point. Due to the shifting nature of the Fade, as well as how little she knew about these areas and he knew about 'mage stuff', planning was probably a waste of time. And they didn't have much of that. Which meant... "We're gonna have to wing it, figure things out as we go."

"Wonderful," Cousland said, everything about him conveying the exact opposite opinion. "Fine. Let's get to it, then."

"Let's." I don't like this any more than you do. "Where to first?"

>>X<<

In the end, they picked at random. Cousland said he couldn't remember where each panel went anyway. Trinne half-believed him, half wondered if he was hoping to put off dealing with Wynne for a while. This one dumped them in that burning area he'd told her about.

"Cozy," Trinne commented glibly as she surveyed the crackling bookshelves. Out of curiosity, she approached the nearest shelf. She could feel the heat radiating off it before she was close enough to read the book spines. They were gibberish anyway. "Oh, so the fire's real. Much as anything's real here..."

Cousland nodded, hunching his shoulders slightly. "What did you think happened to my cloak?"

She honestly hadn't been paying enough attention to notice, but glancing over now she could see the singed edges on what remained of the cloak. "I was just hoping it was an illusion, for flavor or something, and we wouldn't have to worry about it."

"No such luck," Cousland said, a grim half smile pulling at one side of his mouth. "Sloth worked very hard to make this as difficult as possible."

Trinne snorted a laugh at his deadpan tone and cracked her knuckles. "Good thing I've always enjoyed a challenge, then. Anything else you can tell me about this place?"

"Aside from this first little hallway," he said, pushing open the door, "it's a maze."
"Oh, goody," she muttered sarcastically. "Walls or fire?"

"Both."

"Andraste's pyre, that demon really isn't making this easy..." Trinne raked hair back from her face as they walked down the hallway, using a side room to circumvent a fiery barrier. "I guess you better lead the way."

They'd barely rounded the first corner when a snarling, flaming mabari lunged toward them through a nearby wall of fire. Trinne yelped in surprise and flung up one hand to launch a chunk of ice at it. Her aim was awful, of course, but it did glance off the mabari's shoulder, which screwed up its attempt to tackle her. It stumbled into the wall instead. The few seconds it took the beast to shake off the resulting daze proved time enough for her and Cousland to finish it off.

"Thanks for warning me about the burning mabari, Cousland," Trinne said teasingly as they caught their breath.

He made a face and shook his head slightly. "I didn't run into any of them last time-"

His protest was interrupted by a battle cry as a burning templar came running through the flames from the same direction as the mabari. The fiery metal figure honed in on them and lunged forward.

Yeah, I already hate this place. Trinne cursed under her breath and started working up a lightning spell. The templar swung his sword around to point at her and the spell fizzled out. She snarled and clocked him with her staff. "How the sod did you not run into any of these bastard last time?!

"I was being much stealthier," Cousland shot back, dodging around her and the templar to bury one dagger in the gap under the man's--specter's?--arm. "You don't get attacked when they don't see you."

"My apologies, I must have missed the day the templars meant to keep us in taught us to sneak out," she snarked as the templar crumpled. She was going to skip mentioning that she'd learned anyway on her own.

Well, not entirely on your own, a little voice reminded her, mental image flaring of two tousled-haired apprentices in too-big robes learning by trial and error which shadows were deep enough and which templars were the most vigilant. Which lies were the most believable.

Trinne flinched and shook off the memory, looking up just in time to see another templar, this one coming from the opposite direction as their other attackers. "Behind you!"

Cousland spun on one heel, narrowly ducking the new arrival's wild swing and making one of his own. The angle was awkward, and his blade barely grazed the underside of the templar's arm. Still, the burning warrior pulled back in an excellent mimicry of pain (or was it real? What if these were real templars, trapped like them and driven to the point of insanity?), and Trinne took advantage to hit him with a lightning bolt. He convulsed, then collapsed next to the still-burning corpses of the other attackers.

"That's not what I was trying to imply," Cousland said, slightly grumpy, as he sheathed his daggers. "It was... it's easier to be quiet alone."

"Sure, whatever," Trinne shrugged. She kept her staff in hand, half convinced more were going to show up. "So, which way?"

"Um...." Cousland's eyes darted to the left, and Trinne followed his gaze. But that way was a dead
end, a solid stone wall with small mounds of dirt at its base.

"Please tell me you remember where to go," she groaned, running her free hand through her hair.

"I do!" he muttered sharply. He flexed his hands, slowly curling his fingers in and back out. "This way."

Trinne followed him down the hallway spur straight ahead, through two right hand turns(one thanks to fire, the other plain old stone), until they came to a T-branch intersection. Both of the other paths were blocked by fire. "You said you knew where to go!"

Cousland huffed in frustration—though whether at her or the circumstances she couldn't tell—and raked one hand through his hair. "I did! But this is the Fade, right? Things change?"

She had to give him that. "Well, then, now what?" She really didn't relish the idea of picking their way through a maze that could change.

"Give me a second..." Cousland said, scanning the walls and floor.

For a second Trinne considered suggesting they try just going through the flames, maybe that was the point. But only for a second; these particular barriers were at least five feet thick, and she could feel the heat of them from here. If they were like the rest of the flames in this place, they would actually burn, too. So she kept her mouth shut and let Harvey think. He'd been here before, he might pick up on something she'd miss.

It took almost a full minute, but he apparently found something; his gaze locked on a ledge roughly ten feet over their heads. Trinne couldn't see anything, but clearly he did. "Alright, this is going to sound a little weird..."

"We're in the Fade, Cousland," Trinne said glibly. "Weird is normal here."

>>X<<

Well, alright then. "I need to get up there."

"Why?" she was looking between him and the narrow ledge with one eyebrow arched in a mix of curiosity and skepticism.

"I... need to check something." He was pretty sure he saw another of those spirit doors up there, but the air was shimmering with heat just enough to make him doubt. He wanted to check before he said anything.

"Okay... So how do we do that?" Trinne asked, head cocked in thought. "It's pretty high."

"Yeah." It was more than high enough to be out of their reach.

"And I dunno about you, but I'm pretty sure I'm not strong enough to give you a boost," she added with a self-deprecating smirk as she jokingly flexed one arm.

He had to agree with her on that, Harvey conceded with a silent nod. And even if one of them was strong enough to give the other a boost, the ledge looked like it would still be out of reach, just barely. On top of that, this wall looked too smooth to climb—as a human or a rat. Which left precisely one option, unless he wanted to go wander a fiery maze for a couple hours with an increasingly irate(and sarcastic) Trinne Amell for company. Which he didn't. "You'll have to throw me."
Trinne snorted and shot him a withering look of disbelief. "Cousland, we just established that I'm not strong enough to give you a sodding boost, how the bloody Void am I supposed to throw you?"

There was no harm in showing off a little, right? "Just..." Harvey focused his thoughts on the rat form and felt it come easy as a snap of his fingers. "throw me."

Of all the reactions he'd thought Trinne might have to his new ability, yelping in what sounded like actual fear and flinging a blast of arcane energy in his direction hadn't even been on the list.

>>X<<

Mouse. Trinne might have been a little more embarrassed by her reaction if the last person she'd met with the ability to turn into a rodent hadn't been a sodding pride demon. As it was, she'd taken two big steps back and was gripping her staff defensively by the time this rat flashed back to the appearance of Harvey Cousland.

He scrambled back from her as well, until the two of them were eyeing each other warily from as far apart as they could get with the surrounding flames. "Trinne, what the fuck?!!"

Mouse found me. He's trying again, with someone familiar this time. True tests never end, remember? "I'm not falling for it this time, Mouse!" she said firmly, even as her hands shook.

"What are you talking about?!" Cousland demanded clearly bewildered.

"I'm not trying to fool you, it's Cousland!" Now he sounded somewhere between confused and frustrated.

"Bullshit!" Maker, she wished her voice would stop shaking. "Cousland's not a mage, he can't shapeshift. B'sides, you used that one last time, demon."

Cousland frowned briefly, then some level of comprehension washed over his face. "No, Trinne, it really is me. One of the other... people trapped here passed over that... ability before he died."

"Died, huh?" Convenient. She tightened her grip on her staff. "Likely story."

"For the love of--" he cut himself off with an exasperated huff. "I'm not a demon, I swear. But if I was, wouldn't it be awful stupid to shapeshift--especially into something you've seen before--when I knew it would make you suspicious?"

"Not if you knew you could use that exact argument," Trinne shot back, circling slightly as the heat from the flames behind her increased. "Then it's not stupid, it's a calculated risk." Which I can absolutely see Mouse taking. "It's actually a great plan, I hafta admit. 'Rescue' me from my nightmare disguised as one of my... comrades so I trust you, let me be the one to focus on getting out... Much better than last time."

>>X<<

So, learn your lesson about showing off yet? a darkly amused voice chuckled in the back of his head. Harvey suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at it and focused on talking down the wary-bordering-on-irrational mage. "There is no last time because I'm not trying to trick you," he insisted, watching her hands tremble as she tightened them around her staff. Whoever--whatever--she thought he was had actually managed to rattle her, which was no mean feat. "I'm not a demon, I'm Harvey."
Trinne did not look convinced; only edging closer because of the flames encroaching on her back. "And what, I'm supposed to just take your word for it?"

Makers balls, if he'd known she'd be this difficult about it, he would have warned her. Or just left her back with- "Niall." It hit him so hard and fast he said it aloud. "Niall recognized me like this, right?" Harvey gestured at himself. "He'd seen me before we got back from your nightmare, right?"

Trinne hesitated, then her defensive stance slacked just a little as she nodded. "Yeah."

"How and why would I masquerade as someone from your memories with him before teaming up with you?"

>>X<<

Trinne's death grip on her staff wavered as she considered his words. *He has a point. Niall never met Cousland before here. Mouse wouldn't have any way, or any reason, to pretend to be him. "You... let's say I believe you," she conceded cautiously, even that much a struggle. "You're not actually a demon, you are Cousland. How'd you learn to do that? You're not a mage."

"I told you-- from someone else trapped here," Cousland said, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice. "I saved him from a demon, or, tried to, and he... gave me this ability before he died."

She frowned. The Fade was weird, sure, but that was really pushing it. "What did he look like?"

"A rat..." Cousland said slowly. "He was dying, Trinne. Didn't really have the energy to... change back."

What if that was Mouse? Trinne squinted slightly as she looked at him. "How d'you know he wasn't a demon, then?"

"Well, I guess technically I don't," he said with a shrug, shifting a small step closer to her and away from the flames. "But like you just pointed out, I'm not a mage. So it's not like he... possessed me when he passed it over or anything like that. Also, he told me to kill the demons, including Sloth, and gave advice on how, so I really doubt he was a demon."

Wonder who he was then... No, she couldn't go there; it would hurt too much. She needed to focus, decided if she believed this was really Cousland and if she trusted him.

Mouse was wily, but there wasn't any way for him to have picked a face from her memory before meeting her to wear around Niall. So this probably *(PROBABLY)* was really Cousland. And being that he wasn't a mage, he probably *(PROBABLY)* hadn't been possessed by the Fade-rat. She could probably trust him.

She *wanted* to trust him, Trinne realized. She wanted to believe his story, weird as it was. She'd been the one to say weird was normal in the Fade, after all. And she needed his help to get out of here anyway.

So she let her staff hang at her side, gave him one last appraising look, and half-shrugged in wary acceptance. "Fine. You're you, you're not a demon, and you learned how to turn into a rat. I can work with that."

Cousland relaxed from his defensive stance as well, casting a brief glance at the flames. Apparently he shared her worry that they were getting closer. She'd sort of hoped she was imagining that. "Good. I really do want you to throw me up there, though. Are you going to try and kill me again if I turn back into a rat?"
There's a sentence I never expected to hear him say. Trinne snorted (hopefully sounding more playful than dismissive). "I'll repress the urge."

"Thank you in advance for your restraint," he replied, only a little snarky.

She laughed. "Don't mention it. So. Rat?"

"Right." In the space of a blink, he'd changed. There was no fanfare, no flash of light, even. One second she was sharing the hallway with Cousland, the next with a small brown rodent.

Trinne went down on one knee to scoop him up. "Okay, it's still weird. Good weird, but weird."

His whiskers twitched. "How do you think I feel about it?"

"Heh. Good point," she chuckled, eyeing the distance. "Why d'you wanna get up there so bad, anyway?"

"It... might help," he said evasively. "But I want to be sure first."

She couldn't see anything from down here, not with the heat making the air all shimmery, but if he wanted her to throw him at the ledge, she could do that. "Whatever you say..." With one last look to calculate distance--and a quick prayer to the Maker she got it right--Trinne threw him at the ledge.

She'd erred ever so slightly on the side of caution, so while the rat that was Cousland did reach the ledge, he almost immediately started to slide off. In an equally rapid blink, he shifted back, human limbs scrabbling to keep him from falling. He succeeded, just as Trinne started wondering if she knew any spells to make the fall less nasty (or if that would even matter, this being the Fade).

"You good?" she hollered up, raking hair out of her eyes.

Cousland nodded, now firmly seated on the ledge. "...Yes."

"Well, were you right? Is there somethin' up there that'll help?"

>>X<<

"Just... give me a second," Harvey replied, still trying to get his heart to settle after the near-slip. He didn't even know if falling would have hurt; it hadn't before, when he escaped his Nightmare, but who said the rule didn't change like the rest of this damned place? Bloody Void, I hate it here.

Feeling calmer after a moment to breathe, he turned to verify if his hunch was right. It better be; I don't want to be stuck up here... The faint shimmer of a spirit door greeted him, and Harvey let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. Just to be sure, he reached out and touched it. His fingers sank through the surface with only a faint, cool tingle of resistance, brushing against the stonework of whatever room lay on the other side.

"Well?" Trinnie prompted from below, an edge of something tense in her voice.

Harvey was on the verge of telling her to be patient when he noticed how close the flames were getting. No wonder she was in a hurry. "There is something..." he hesitated, the flaw in this plan suddenly smacking him like a boulder. "But we need to get you up here to use it..."

>>X<<

Sonovabitch, Trinne thought sourly, staring at the wall and the height of the ledge. "How in Andraste's pyre are we supposed to accomplish that?!!" she demanded. "I can't turn into a rat, and
there's no one to throw me if I could."

"I don't-" Cousland began, raising his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Do you have any spells you could use?"

"N-" Trinne cut off her automatic negative as she actually thought about it. "Maybe..."

This was one of the crazier ideas she'd ever had, the sort of thing she would've gotten in trouble for as a teen. And she wasn't even sure it would actually work. There were at least half a dozen ways it could go wrong just off the top of her head.

"Well?" Cousland's prompting was a near-perfect echo of hers from a moment ago and she almost laughed.

"I have an idea. It's a little crazy an' doesn't have the best odds, but..." she glanced around. "neither does stayin' put." She rapidly outlined her plan, explaining what she'd need him to do. She couldn't make out his face with the distance and angle, but his body language spoke to growing incredulity.

"Trinne, that's crazy," he protested when she finished.

"Crazy's all I got," Trinne retorted as she walked closer. The flames hadn't closed in any more, but Maker only knew how long that would hold true. And it was easy for him to talk; he was already up there. "Catch."

Cousland barely grasped her intent in time to catch her staff when she tossed it up. "Are you sure about this?" he pressed one last time as she backed up.

Sure it's crazy and desperate, maybe. She forced a wry laugh to cover her pounding heart. "Nope."

Magic buzzed in the air around her, coming easily when she called it. At least on that count she'd been right, which was promising. One last deep breath for her nerves, and Trinne started running toward the wall.

>>>X<<<

This is not going to end well, Harvey bet himself grimly as he watched the approaching mage. It's a bad idea.

But he hadn't had any better, so Trinne's crazy plan it was. Trinne's hand glowed with greenish magic as she drew closer, and two rocky projectiles flew out to slam into the wall. They disintegrated for the most part, but just enough lodged in the wall to serve the desired purpose.

Mildly surprised even that much of this batshit crazy plan of hers had worked, Harvey quickly stowed Trinne's staff along the back edge of his perch and reached one hand through the shimmery portal, grabbing on to the stonework past it for a steadying grip. Just because Trinne was insane didn't mean he was. Thus braced for what was coming, he leaned forward just as Trinne pushed off the ground. Maker, I hope this works.

>>>X<<<

Trinne winced as her boot slammed down on the first of the rocky protrusions she'd added to the wall. A jolt of pain shot up her leg, and she felt the stone crumbling even as she pushed off for the second one.

That one gave out the second she put weight on it. Shit. It had hit harder, and from shorter range, but
she'd hoped with her magic being stronger here that wouldn't be a problem. So much for that. One hand flailed upward in an instinctive attempt to catch something--

--Cousland's hand closed around her wrist, and Trinne barely reacted in time to mirror the grip before her momentum tried to jolt them apart. She grit her teeth and heard him grunt with the effort of not letting go. As soon as she could, she braced her feet against the wall and started scrambling up, trying to relieve some of the strain on him. It was only a foot or so to get a hand up over the edge, and then an undignified scramble and a lot of help from Cousland to get the rest of her up, too.

"Thanks," she panted, leaning back against the wall. "That somehow went both better and worse than I was expecting."

"You're welcome," Cousland said with a nod as he rolled his shoulder. "I can hardly believe that worked."

*That makes two of us.* Trinne gave a shaky laugh. "A common sentiment where my plans are concerned. Now, what in the Void did you find that could help us?"

"That." He gestured at the blank wall behind them.

"Look, Harvey, I'm tired and irritated already, and we just started. So if you could skip speaking in riddles that would be gr-" She cut herself off with a gasp as he stuck his arm through the wall.

"How- What- When?"

Cousland sort-of smiled. "Another dreamer, a templar. I helped him fight a bunch of darkspawn and he did something that made it so I can see these doors before he disappeared. I don't know if he died or woke up or what..." he nodded toward the wall. "It is useful."

"I'll say," Trinne muttered as they both carefully got to their feet. "So that's our way out of here?"

He nodded and held out his hand. "Come on."

She took it and stepped through the wall behind him. It didn't feel anything like the rushing sensation of traveling through the Fade portals, which made sense. The unseen door was more like pressing against subtle tension, as if she was trying to walk through one of the spiderwebs in Leorah's storerooms. It wasn't until they'd stepped out on the other side and Cousland was letting go of her hand that she registered his had actually felt cool--almost cold--despite the oppressive heat they had just escaped.

The room they had escaped to was positively boring--which was not at all a bad thing, considering. Four stone walls, no exits or entrances that were visible to her. The only thing of any interest was the knobby spirals of a lyrium growth springing from one wall. Trinne absently brushed her fingers against one of the spirals, and a surge of energy flowed into her, the spiral going dark.

"Whoa," she mumbled. She felt rested as a good night's sleep, not drained from adrenaline-spurred fights and crazy plans. "So, um... is there another one of those doors in here? Maybe a little easier to reach?"

>>X<<

Harvey smiled faintly at the mage's joking tone. He agreed with her on *that*; no more doors that required ridiculous acrobatics to just reach would be nice. Fortunately, this chamber was cooperating on that score. "Over here."

Trinne followed him to the opposite wall from their entrance. "So, these doors... is there anything
special to them, or does it just look like a door?"

He hadn't really paid attention until now, if he was honest. There was so much about their situation that was more unusual and stressful, noticing the appearance of ethereal doors hadn't crossed his mind. But since she was dog-with-a-bone curious and this room was safe (if a little chilly—or maybe that was just him), he could take a minute to answer her. No harm in a breather.

It proved easier said than done. Even as Harvey stared at the door looking for details, it shimmered and blurred. So he gave Trinne his best guess. "It's tall and covered with some swirling pattern, like the doors in the tower. That's the best I can see." He reached for her hand again. "We should keep moving."

"Right, sure." Trinne slipped her hand in his, so warm he could feel it through his glove. She held tight as they stepped through the door, but quickly let go afterward, eyeing him with what looked like actual concern. "You alright?"

Harvey nodded, despite the shiver that raced up his spine at that moment. "Fine." It was definitely better, since that door had led to a different point in the fiery maze. It was warmer than the doorless room, at least. "Let's go."

She was still eyeing him with concerned skepticism, but—wonder of wonders—seemed to have picked up on the drop it in his voice. Traveling through the doors had made the cold come faster. He'd have to remember that. He flexed his hands to work out the stiffness as they walked down the hall. Hopefully he wouldn't have to remember for too long.

Trinne looked ready to blaze through the halls bold as brass, but that plan was quickly ended by a huge stone door, so immovable it may as well've been part of the wall surrounding it. She glared, kicked it a couple times in protest, and spun back around. "Guess we'll have to try the side rooms," she muttered, impatiently raking hair out of her face. "Andraste's ass, for a Sloth demon he sure was a busy little bee."

Harvey snorted a half chuckle of agreement as he trailed behind her. Too much effort involved' the demon had claimed back in the Circle, but this had to have taken more. Then again, maybe it was a good thing he couldn't understand the rationale of a demon, he told himself, keeping his hands near his daggers as they looked for a way out. The first two rooms they checked were empty.

The third most definitely was not.

Trinne barked out several creative curses when confronted by a heavily armored, burning (of course) templar upon opening the third door. She couldn't even backpedal because Cousland was right behind her. So instead she dodged to the side as said templar uttered a battle cry and swung his greatsword, hollering "Move!" to warn Cousland as she did.

He must've heard her—or figured it out—because the next sound to reach her ears was the thunk of the sword embedding in the stone floor. Trinne pivoted to face their attacker, skipping straight over ice and lobbing a stonefist at him instead. It was too hot, there were too many flames, ice spells would cost more effort than she could afford to give.

The templar snarled in pain when it impacted his shoulder and spun angrily, moving toward her with the stalking strides of a predator.

Now she backpedaled, lightning arcing from her hands to his armor. It barely seemed to slow him...
down. The flames that wreathed him must be dulling her spells. Which meant... "Cousland!"

Even as his name left her lips, Trinne caught sight of the rogue over the templar's shoulder. But he only had one dagger drawn, what was he doing?!

The answer came a split second later. The templar pulled back for another swing, but Harvey grabbed his wrist. Instantly, ice crackled out from the point of contact, encasing half the templar and all of his sword, freezing it to the ground.

*I'm not even surprised anymore...* She barely twitched an eyebrow as Cousland circled the half-frozen templar, now holding both daggers. "We are gonna talk about that later, right?" she asked with a breathless laugh.

He gave a single, sharp nod, focus more on their opponent. "...Sure."

Trinne lobbed another stonefist at the templar. The impact sent ice shards scattering across the room, hissing as they dissolved in the overwhelming flames. The templar stumbled, dazed, and almost dropped his sword. She knew better than to relent with such a clear opening, and sent several short bursts of lightning dancing toward him in rapid succession. She paused only once the templar was thoroughly battered to give Cousland an opening. The rogue slipped in close, his daggers finding gaps in the templar's armor too small for her spells to exploit. When he backed away again to avoid the templar's retaliation, Trinne slammed another, decisive, stonefist into the templar's chest. He reeled back and his greatsword hit the floor with a clang.

"Enough!" he cried. He fixed Trinne with an intense look. "You. You are strong enough," he said fervently. He paced toward her, eyes still locked, gait deliberate but somehow less threatening. She still took an instinctive step back before his hand clapped down on her bicep, just below where her leather jerkin ended. His gauntlet was still hot. "Strong enough to free us. Take Rhagos' power. Use it to burn him." His eyes and hand flared with heat, the latter searing through her shirt.

Trinne grit her teeth hard to keep from crying out in pain. It felt like *all of her* was on fire, even though he was only touching her arm. She'd toughened up *some* since escaping Highever, but this.... And just as abruptly as it came, the pain was gone. The templar was speaking again, she realized, shaking out of the haze.

"...he bars the way," the templar hissed. "Use his power, dreamer. Use it to burn them *all.*" With a slight shove, he released her. Moments later, he had shimmered and faded into nonexistence. Trinne wondered vaguely if he'd been real, and if so, was he dead or woken up now?

Cousland cleared his throat behind her. "Uh, Trinne?" When she spun to look at him, he nodded toward her hands and she looked down.

They were wreathed in flame. Like the templar. As were her arms. Trinne jolted, muttering a curse under her breath as she instinctively swiped at the flames enveloping her forearms. The merry orange tongues glided over her hand, like oil on water, and stuck back to her skin like they belonged there. Apparently they did; for all they *looked* real, they didn't hurt.

"Huh." She stared at them for a moment, letting that sink in, then glanced at Cousland. He half-shrugged in game acceptance, and she looked back down at her hands, a slow smile spreading across her face. "Neat."
The Spirit of Teamwork

Chapter Notes

Have a super long chapter as an apology/thank you for your patience. :D

Fire had never been Trinne's strong suit.

She was pretty bad at most primal magic, honestly, except lightning. But she was extra abysmal with fire. It had never mattered in the Circle; fire was Jowan's strong suit (one of the few things where he was actually really good), and they were always together. There wasn't any point to her getting better. 'Specially when there were other schools of magic she wanted to learn. And fire was so damn hard.

All of this made it some kind of ironic that was the special ability the dreaming templar had given her. She examined her hands again, flicking her fingers to see what the clinging flames would do. They danced and shivered, leaving trails of light in their wake but neither grew nor faded.

"I don't think staring at it's going to do anything." Cousland's dry comment cut through her focus and dragged her back to reality. If this counted as reality.

Trinne rolled her eyes and flicked her fingers again to send embers dancing. "Forgive me if some of us are still impressed by the new things we can do."

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "So are you just going to walk around on fire the rest of the time we're here?"

"Maybe I will," she shot back, half friendly teasing, half trying to get a rise out of him. (All covering the fact she didn't know how to turn it off. Yet.)

He raised an eyebrow. "Because that'll go great with this." A vague gesture with one hand that brought to mind images of the templar freezing to the floor.

"Oh, yeah, that. Where'd that come from, anyway?" Trinne glanced toward the spot where the templar had frozen, but the heat of the room had melted every trace. She wasn't even sure why she'd expected otherwise.

"I think the same place as being able to see the doors." Cousland half-shrugged. "The templar. They both showed up at the same time, anyway. And the room where I found him was covered in ice."

It was such a perfect mirror of her experience it assuaged any lingering doubts she had about this really being him, rather than a demon or something trying to trick her. "And how do you control those?" She rotated one hand, then twisted her arm back and forth slowly, watching how the flames reacted.

"I... don't really." He winced apologetically. "They're both just... there."

Trinne remembered how cold his hand had felt when they first got here and couldn't even be mad. "Oh."
"The rat's the only thing I have any say in," he continued, "and that's just... focusing my thoughts on being it. It's hard to explain."

"You look like that because you think you do," she muttered under her breath and shuddered. Still, it couldn't hurt to try. Smother, she thought, curling her hands into fists and concentrating on the flames.

They went out.

She grinned triumphantly and looked over toward Harvey. He gave a single nod, as if to acknowledge he saw. For further testing, she flicked her fingers open again. Ignite. They sparked out her fingers and raced up her arms to meet in the center of her chest.

Trinne switched back and forth a few times to be really sure that worked before leaving the flames off. Even with them gone, her shoulder throbbed faintly where the templar had grabbed her arm. There wasn't a mark or anything, just a sense of pressure, like he was still holding on to her. It was disconcerting, but she could deal with it.

"So..." she began slowly, looking around the room. Ah. There was another door. "That way?"

Cousland shrugged and nodded. "We don't really have that many options..."

"True, but it's better than giving up." Trinne reached for the door and found it hot to the touch.

"And when did I advocate giving up?" he said, a trace of irritation in his voice.

"Not sayin' you did, Cousland, good grief," she muttered, nudging the door open with the heel of her hand.

There was a rush of flame that had them both jumping back and groping for weapons. That proved to be an overreaction—the flames didn't herald a demon or some other new enemy, just another wall of fire, like in the maze. This one, however, was across the doorway, filling the whole space.

It also didn't seem as hot as the ones before. Trinne stepped closer and squinted through the flames. She could almost see—

Cousland grabbed her wrist and yanked her back just before she leaned into the actual wall of flame. "What are you doing?!

"There's somethin' in there! I was trying to see if it was something we could use!" She was so focused on being irritated at his interruption she didn't think to shake her arm free of his grasp. "You know, a way out!"

"Maker forgive me for not wanting you to burn your face off in the process," he snapped back.

"Oh, come on, Cousland, it's not that..." her gesture went wide and heat prickled her knuckles. "...hot."

It was for him; she could see his face flushed with the heat of standing so close. And she could feel the heat, it was just... dull. Like she was feeling it through several layers of clothing. But her knuckles had started to blister when she curled her hand back, and that stung.

Trinne stared at the blisters, then at the wall of flames. Harvey still hadn't let go of her wrist, and she wondered if his hand felt cold because it was, or because she was hot. She reached toward the flames again—she'd seen something in there and wanted to know what it was—but even as her skin started to
sting and Harvey uneasily muttered her name, she flicked open her fingers to summon her own flames and lunged.

Her name turned into a yelp of surprise as she dragged Cousland through the flames with her, and she fervently hoped her guess had been right. After all, he could take her through the spirit doors. Didn't it follow she could do (fundamentally) the same thing? She tripped almost immediately on the far side of the flames and they tumbled, elbows in ribs and knees in backs. They weren't on fire, though. Trinne was... more familiar that she wanted to be with the smell of burning hair(and fabric), and that was distinctly absent.

Small blessings.

She landed on her back, one elbow smarting from the impact with the floor, staring up through the billowing flames at the pallid green of the Fade. *There's no ceiling....* This place looked like a building; walls and floors resembled stone, there were doors, but above their heads was open.

"Trinne, what the *Void* was that about?" Cousland groaned. He was rubbing the back of his head when she looked his way, and appeared unharmed but peeved. She *had* just dragged him through a wall of fire without warning. Peeved was justified.

"Sorry," Trinne said, flashing an apologetic smile for good measure. "I wasn't trying to kill us or anything," she added, scrambling up and scanning the small room for whatever she'd seen through the flames.

"Could've fooled me," he muttered. "Looking for... whatever you think you saw, then?" He sounded... not skeptical. Dubious, maybe? Like he thought she should have exercised more caution. Or warned him, at least.

There. Trinne hurried toward the spindly waist high... protrusion in the middle of the floor. "Yep. This." It reminded her of the font from her Harrowing, except the bowl at the top spilled over with a purple glow instead of bluish-white. Like those pillar things they'd used to leave her nightmare and Niall's hideaway. She was willing to bet it worked the same.

"And what were you planning to do with it?" Cousland asked as he joined her.

"Travel, hopefully," she said, swiping one hand through the outer edges of the purple mist. "We can't get anywhere else here til we can get through that sealed up door, which'll probably require breakin' solid stone. Maybe if we go somewhere else we can make some progress toward killin' the demons between us and Sloth."

*Or if we're really lucky, maybe it'll take us to Wynne and Alistair.*

He still looked uneasy, flexing one hand before raking it through his hair. "I'd feel better if I knew where it went..."

"Could say the same about every time we used somethin' similar, Cousland," she pointed out.

He snorted a wry chuckle and half-smiled. "True." He held out one hand and shot her a questioning look. "Why not? Like you said, it's better than staying here."

"That's the spirit!" Trinne teased, taking his outstretched hand in hers as she plunged her other hand into the purple light.

>>> X <<<
This trip was less like falling, or even rushing, and more an overwhelming bright light that left them somewhere else when it faded. Trinne blinked away the spots dancing across her vision and tried to figure out where they were now. It looked like the tower's laboratory, enough so she wondered for just a second if they'd accidentally found their way out. But no. It was too hazy, and the scattered books and bottles looked like they were growing out of the shelves rather than resting on them.

"Oh, shit."

Trinne glanced over at Cousland's quiet oath. "What?"

"I..." He let out a long breath, as if steadying his nerves or trying to shed an unpleasant memory. "I was here already..."

"Okay, so what do we hafta watch out for here?" she asked, not liking his lingering unease one bit.

He shot her an apologetic grimace. "Insane mages. Maybe a couple rage demons? But it was mostly crazed and bloodthirsty mages."

Who I might recognize. Soddin' fantastic. It didn't really help to remind herself this was essentially a dream and anyone they ran into wasn't really here. The demons in her nightmare hadn't really been her family, either, but they had still been difficult to fight. "Lovely," she said out loud. "How much of it did you see last time?"

"At least half?" He shrugged uncertainly. "A lot of the doors were closed so I don't know where they went for sure."

"Right." That made sense; it was smart to be cautious when he was by himself. "Well, let's get it over with, I guess."

Both of them were relieved when the hallway was empty. The low chatter of voices was audible, but it was coming from the side chambers. Hopefully they would get to choose their battles more easily here than in the burning area. They moved forward with caution and soon were almost level with the open door of the first room. The voices inside were quiet but they could still hear snatches of the conversation.

"...can't trust anyone..."

"...all out to get us..."

"...kill everyone..."

There were three separate voices, at least three mages, two of which she vaguely almost recognized. If they were really as crazy and bloodthirsty as Cousland had described--as they'd sounded just now--this wasn't going to be fun.

Unless... Trinne smirked and tugged Harvey's arm to back up a few paces. He flinched slightly at her touch and she wondered again how hot she felt thanks to her new fire abilities. If it was worse thanks to whatever made it so he could freeze people. But that was for later, maybe if they got another breather. For now, she had something like a plan.

"Give me just a few seconds' head start," she whispered once they were far enough back to avoid being heard. "Then we'll need to deal with them one at a time."

Cousland raised an eyebrow. "What are you planning to do?"
"Sleep spell," Trinne said, picking absently at a hangnail. "It'll knock 'em out so we don't hafta deal with three or more angry mages at the same time. But I've never used it in a fight before, so I dunno if they'll stay out once attacked, you know? So one at a time."

"Sounds like a plan," he nodded, and drew his daggers as they moved back toward the door.

_Showtime_, she thought wryly, and was already summoning the spell as she stepped into the doorway. The room was small enough for her to affect the whole area, which was a good thing--there were _five_ mages sharing its confines. Her spell hit all of them as they spun to attack, and only one managed to resist.

He snarled and glared at Trinne, something fiery building around his hands.

She was in the middle of summoning a retaliatory spell when a small silver blur spun past and one of Cousland's throwing knives dug into the man's chest. He howled in pain and rage and shifted his attention to the new threat. It was all the opening Trinne needed to finish him off with a lightning bolt.

"Thanks," she nodded as Cousland stepped into the room behind her.

He shrugged--"Seemed like the biggest threat"--and bent to retrieve the throwing knife. "How long do we have?"

"The rest of them, y'mean? About thirty more seconds, assumin' we don't slip up and rouse 'em early." She channeled another lightning bolt into the nearest mage, watched the body tense and fall limp, and tried not to feel guilty for handling it this way. All factors considered, it was probably smart not to take them in a straight fight, and they had clearly been readying to attack, but it still felt wrong.

They were, of course, easily dispatched, the last one just beginning to stir when Cousland finished him off.

"Right," Trinne sighed, rubbing her arms to try and shake the slimy feeling. "Moving on..." She'd been right; she at least vaguely recognized all the mages. Whether this was a trick of the Fade or something more sinister, she didn't really want to dwell on.

"You alright?" Cousland asked, frowning slightly.

"Yeah, I just... I know they were gonna kill us and all, but it feels... I dunno, not wrong, exactly.... Cheating maybe? To take them out like this."

His frown deepened, but he was nice enough not point out it had been _her_ plan. "Would you rather've been clobbered by five spells in a row?"

"No, you're right, I know, I just..." _They look like people I knew._ "Never mind. Let's keep moving."

Fortunately for Trinne's conscience, most of the other rooms were either empty or held only corpses, the mages having killed each other. She didn't look too closely at the faces. Just in case. But all good things came to an end, and that included their luck.

The room in question was half the size of the tower library, dotted with a few shelves that made line of sight tricky. Trinne was fairly certain she saw a half dozen figures in there, all the same.

"Hey, Cousland, d'you think you could sneak in there and scout? Y'know, as a rat? So we know how many there are and don't wind up ambushed or anything," she babbled, trying to preemptively justify the risk.
"I think so," he nodded, lips quirking in a bemused smile. "Long as you don't try to kill me this
time."

Trinne rolled her eyes. "Maker's breath, no. I know it's coming now. And Andraste forgive me for
having issues with... with *Fade rodents*. Blame the demon in my Harrowing." But now his almost
teasing smile was starting to shift to a look of surprise at her forceful tone and she caught herself mid-
overshare(again). "Oh, never mind. Just... be a rat."

"Whatever you say," he said, only sounding a little glib. Half a second later, the rogue was gone and
the rat was carefully creeping into the room in question.

>>X<<

Harvey had barely started his rat's eye view reconnaissance when one of the mages giggled and he
froze.

Damn. He recognize that laugh. He'd been hoping rather fervently that its owner and her friends had
done each other in since his last time through. Apparently they'd simply relocated, the ones who
were left. He didn't see the elf anymore. Or the shambling corpse that had been following the
woman.

But the firemage was still there. Looking *much* worse for wear--robes tattered and burned in several
places, standing at a definite list--but somehow still on his feet. A quick look at the others confirmed
this was the group Harvey had run from his first time through, with a couple new faces added to
replace earlier casualties, spread through the room as if to guard the short flight of stairs and large
stone door at the far end.

Given the way this whole mess had worked so far, they probably were. And it was just as probably
where he and Trinne needed to get.

Damn, damn, damn. He wished, just once, some part of this could be easy. One ear swiveled toward
a new sound, his limbs already tensing to run, but it was just one of the new mages--a slender, silver-
haired elf--humming. Harvey relaxed and continued his careful scouting. He made note of the
shelves and desks--potential cover, for both sides, where all the mages were standing, anything else
they could use. The mages were, unfortunately, too spread out for Trinne to catch more than half in
that sleep spell, so their odds still wouldn't be great.

Two on six was still better than he'd had before, alone and half-frozen. Harvey shivered at the
memory and made his way farther into the room. If he was right and they needed that door, a fight
was unavoidable. Best to know exactly what they were getting themselves into, however grim a
picture it might be. Grim enough he stayed under things as much as he could.

The humming mage abruptly broke off with a small noise of surprise. "Hmm. What's this now?"
There were footsteps, headed toward where he'd just been, and Harvey pressed himself further into
his current cover under a desk as he turned to look as well.

Frost glittered on the hazy stone floor, trailing right toward his hiding place. *Shit.* He hadn't thought
there was that much buildup. Maybe it was more concentrated in this form. Maybe it would melt
before they found him.

And maybe if he pinched himself hard enough, he'd just wake up. The odds of success were about
the same.

He could see feet now; one of the male mages, not the woman humming, was coming closer. So
much for being stealthy. Still there was no point in giving up the element of surprise before he had to. After all, the approaching mage would see him if he tried to leave. So he waited. Even though it set his teeth on edge, those few seconds stretching an eternity, he waited until the mage stood right in front of him and was crouching down to see where the trail of frost went.

Almost. Almost. Now. Just before the man's face came into view past the edge of the desk where he sheltered, Harvey leaped. He shifted back to himself midair and crashed elbow-first into the mage. They tumbled back awkwardly, the mage wheezing and Harvey fumbling for one of his daggers. It figured that now, when he needed them, they were impossible to find-

Someone shouted, a wordless cry of alarm and anger, and a spell crackled by just over his head. Even as he flinched away, hollering for Trinne, his hand closed around the hilt of one dagger. Harvey yanked it free and buried in the side of the gasping mage's neck. He pulled the weapon back as the mage convulsed and went still, scrambling up to better see how things stood. The humming mage and the woman from earlier were both staring straight at him. The latter's eyes lit with recognition and she grinned.

"You came back!" she said gleefully, just as Trinne whirled through the doorway and flung a stonefist at her. She dodged it, easily, and clapped her hands around her staff. "And you brought a friend! Oh, this will be so much fun!"

"Or you could just let us be on our way," Trinne snarked, shooting Harvey a questioning look. You okay? He nodded and she turned back to the woman. "Cause this is gettin' really old."

The woman laughed, a high, discordant sound, as her cohorts edged closer. "But hurting people is what we do," she pouted. "We're mages. Haven't you ever listened to the templars, silly?"

Something dangerous flickered across Trinne's face. "I try not to," she retorted, and with a twist of her hand threw a lightning bolt at the woman.

The one hit, but the woman just laughed as she stumbled back. "So much fun!"

Neither Harvey nor Trinne wasted any time. Trinne kept her focus on the woman, while Harvey headed for the firemage. Between the man's skill set and rough condition, getting him out of the picture fast was a priority.

He dodged around a bookshelf, intending to use it for cover as he approached, and almost ran slap-bang into another mage, this one a scrawny blond man in yellow robes. The two stared at each other for half a heartbeat before both swung into motion. Harvey raked one dagger across the man's throat as he shoved past, still intent on his original goal. Unfortunately, the blond was ever so slightly faster on the draw, and finished his spell just as Harvey finished him. The flickering purple glyph was concerning but didn't seem to be doing anything. Harvey wondered briefly what the mage had been trying to accomplish as he resumed course toward the firemage.

Trinne crowed in triumph just beyond his vision as he rounded the bookshelf, and he fervently hoped that meant the woman she'd been fighting was dead. His own target had caught sight of him and was summoning a spell. Harvey tossed a throwing knife in the man's direction to interrupt the casting long enough he could get close.

It missed.

He had half a second for stunned irritation—he hadn't missed in years—before he had to drop and roll to avoid the gush of flames pouring in his direction from the mage's hands. Harvey huffed in frustration, almost a growl, really, as he pushed to his feet and charged toward the mage. He slashed
at the man's chest, but his blade only caught the already-ruined robes. Another strike that just barely skinned the firemage's chest, and this time Harvey did growl in frustration.

The stonefist that slammed into his chest caught him completely off-guard. Other mages, he thought vaguely as he went tumbling back toward the wall. There are other mages. Followed in short order by an emphatic Ow. Between the initial impact and the subsequent ones as he tumbled into the wall, Harvey's vision was starting to double when he looked back toward the firemage. But no number of bumps to the head could hide the fiery ember of a spell building between the man's hands.

This is why I wanted him out of the picture first, Harvey groused to himself as he struggled back to his feet. His ribs hurt. Could you break bones in the Fade? Hopefully not, but it wouldn't surprise him if you could.

The firemage completed his spell before Harvey was more than halfway back up, and that ember of a spell corkscrewed through the air, headed for an impact just a few feet in front of the rogue.

Just as it hit, there was a blur of motion and snarled obscenity and Trinne skidded in between him and the brunt of the spell, summoning her own flames as she did. The burning form didn't protect from the fireball's shockwave, of course, but with Trinne protected and in the way it did ensure neither of them was worse than singed. Without time to properly set herself, she reeled back from the force, catching her balance just before running into Harvey.

He still instinctively reached to help steady her as the flames died down. She flicked a quick glance in his direction before firing a lightning bolt at the firemage. It hit him dead center in the chest, and he spasmed briefly before he fell.

Trinne gave a nod of satisfaction and turned to look at Harvey. "You okay?" she checked, resting one hand on his shoulder. A small pulse of general healing magic flared from her touch.

Harvey nodded. "Annoyed and aching in a few places, but not reduced to ash, so thank you for that."

She grinned. "You're welcome. I'm just glad it worked." She cracked her knuckles and glanced back down the room. "I did finish off the, uh, crazy lady, but the others are just under a sleep spell. So we only have another... ten seconds before we have to deal with them."

"Right." Harvey rolled his shoulders, grateful the ache in his ribs had lessened. "At least we're both still breathing."

Trinne snorted a laugh. "Yeah, count our blessings, huh?"

There was a scrape of wood against stone, followed by a quiet--slightly unhinged--laugh. "What for?" asked the humming elf as she approached. "It won't make the monsters go away."

Trinne's jaw tightened, storms in her eyes as one started building around her fists. "We'll just have to take care of the monsters ourselves, then," she retorted, lightning leaping from her fingertips again.

One bolt hit the elf's shoulders and the other grazed her cheek. They weren't enough to kill her, but they did a fair bit of damage and distracted her for a handful of seconds. Plenty of time for Harvey to get close enough he could bury a dagger in her chest. The two remaining mages, clad in blue robes, didn't put up much of a fight. The thunderclouds in Trinne's eyes lingered even after all their attackers were dead.

It was disconcerting enough Harvey felt obligated to ask, "Are you alright?"
"Yeah, yeah," she sighed, raking one hand through her hair. "She, um, brought up some memories. They're not bad--pretty good ones, mostly--but I don't appreciate havin' them thrown in my face during a fight like that."

Understandable. And all he needed to know. "Got it."

Trinne smiled, her cheery nature creeping back to the forefront. "You ready to keep movin', or do you need another minute? You definitely got worse than I did."

He wasn't sure that was strictly true, given she'd stepped in front of a fireball, but he was still catching his breath. "Another minute would be good."

"Sure." She plunked down on the steps that led up and out, patting the remaining space in clear invitation.

>>X<<

Cousland hesitated a fraction of a second before he joined her, and Trinne couldn't help wondering if it was because he still ached or some other reason. But he did join her, brushing his fingers over the spiny lyrium nodule that grew out of the banister as he did. To her surprise, it flared and went dark under his touch, just like the earlier one had for her.

"They work for you, too?" she blurted.

Cousland looked at the lyrium growth and then at her before, slowly, "Yes..."

"Sorry, I'm just... I've had it drummed into me for years that lyrium only works for mages and templars." Trinne shrugged. "And you're neither, so..."

"It's another Fade thing, apparently," he said, sitting forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Niall tried to explain it, but the particulars sort of went over my head? Something about aligning us here with how our bodies are back in the waking world."

"Oh." It made sense. "So I guess it's good when it works, huh?" she chuckled. "Means no one's come along to kill us in our sleep."

A smile pulled at his lips. "Very true."

They lapsed into silence for a few seconds before her curiosity overcame her. "So," she began. "Not judging, I swear, but... what happened? To stealthily checking things out, I mean?"

In answer, Harvey reached over and ran his finger across the expanse of step between them. Frost trailed behind his touch, clinging to the hazy stone. "They saw me."

Trinne stared at the ice crystals, brow furrowing in concern. "I wouldn't think it'd get so bad that fast." If they were closer, she might've reached over, rested a hand on his arm to check. But they'd only just started the slow crawl from animosity to something approaching camaraderie and she wasn't sure how he'd take it. Besides, her own gauge of hot and cold was thrown off right now.

He shook his head at her concern. "It isn't, really. I guess it's more... concentrated when I'm a rat. I left a trail without realizing."

That made sense. And she couldn't really get mad at him for not knowing every aspect of how his dreamer-powers worked. Sod, she was a mage and she wasn't sure how everything worked here. "You're sure?" She glanced down at the icy curlcues on the step.
"I left those because I was trying to," Cousland clarified, rubbing frost off the back of one glove. "When I start leaving icy trails unintentionally, then you can worry." He looked over at her. "You ready to keep going?"

Trinne snorted a laugh as she pushed to her feet. "We stopped for you, Cousland. I'm good if you are."

He nodded and stood as well. They took one last breath for courage and headed up the steps.

>>X<<

A panicked cry for help greeted them as the stone door grated open. "Please, I just want to leave! Just let me go!"

Trinne had her staff in hand and a spell building at her fingertips before the entire scene came into view. The first thing her eyes landed on was a man in yellow robes, curling inward as if that would protect him from the spells being flung his direction by a matching pair of blondes in blue.

"Hey!" she hollered at the women, "Leave him alone!"

They turned toward her in unison, grinned in unison, uncannily synced as if they were double vision of the same person. It gave her the creeps. Her favorite way of dealing with the creeps was to throw lightning at things, so that's what she did. Two lightning spells in quick succession at the creepy twins, ducking to the side to avoid the arcane bolts they threw at her.

That was when the rumble in the floor registered. Trinne did a spin of her own and stiffened at the sight of three golems charging into the fray. _Oh, come on!_ was the extent of coherent thought she could manage. One golem would be hard, _three_ was just plain ridiculous.

Fortunately, Cousland kept his wits better than she did. Even as Trinne froze in shock, he dodged around her in two strides and bent to touch the ground. For the cold not being 'that bad', an almost astonishing quantity of ice radiated out from his hand, sheeting across the floor in front of the golems. All three went down in a tumble the second their massive feet hit the ice.

With help now arrived, the cowering mage straightened and assisted in fighting his tormentors.

Cousland stood and headed for the mages as well. "I'll help with them; I think spells will fare better than daggers against _that_." He jerked one thumb toward the lone golem ponderously getting back to its feet.

Excellent point. Trinne nodded and faced the golem as he continued toward the mages. She hexed it into vulnerability and threw a stonefist at its head, hoping to stun it, however briefly.

It growled as it dodged, and then dug one hand into the floor and ripped out a hunk of stone almost as big as Trinne herself.

"Watch out!" she hollered, conjuring a hasty lightning bolt before dodging out of the boulder's path.

Cousland and the mage in yellow heard her and also ducked, but the blue-clad blondes didn't, and were showered with rock fragments when the boulder hit the wall above their heads. The momentary distraction was enough for Cousland to get closer and the yellow mage to start casting a spell, but Trinne couldn't spare the time to see how successful they were. She had a hulking stone giant to deal with, temporarily more vulnerable to any damage she could inflict. She threw another stonefist, a couple lightning bolts, shot a quick prayer of thanks to the Maker that casting was so much easier here.
It resisted a sleep spell and lumbered forward to take a swipe at her. Trinne dodged and risked the extra power it took to cast an ice spell, freezing it to the floor. She continued pummeling it with spells as she dodged back out of its range.

There was a sharp cry of pain and she glanced toward the creepy blondes—just in time to watch Cousland pull his dagger out of one's ribs as she fell. Trinne allowed herself a smirk of satisfaction before returning to her assault on the golem. It was starting to waver, steps faltering as it tried to chase her down again. She ducked its feeble swipe even more easily this time, and finished it off with a lightning bolt to the face.

*Take that, ugly.* There was an abruptly cut off cry of rage from the remaining blonde as the yellow mage turned her into an ice sculpture, which he then shattered with a stonefist.

"Not bad for our odds," Trinne muttered. She raked one hand through her hair as she crossed to join Cousland and the mage they'd rescued. "Neat trick," she said to Cousland, nodding toward the half-melted sheet of ice.

He shrugged as he sheathed his daggers. "I'm just glad it worked. I figured it would in theory, but I've never tried that before. Not on purpose," he amended as some thought struck him.

"Thank you, both of you," the mage in yellow said, his shoulders sagging in relief. He looked almost familiar, but Trinne couldn't place him no matter how hard she tried. Given that he still seemed to have his senses and want out, she was willing to bet he'd been working with Niall. "This nightmare has gone on long enough." His eyes—starkly pale against his dark skin—almost seemed to glow as he locked gazes with Trinne. "You... I do not know how much it will help, not against the demon here, but I give you my strength. Perhaps it will help you elsewhere." He reached out and lightly jabbed two fingers against her forehead. "Use it to free us all."

Trinne had about a dozen question she wanted to ask, but he turned and headed toward the door, fading from view before he reached it. "Okay..." she muttered instead, rubbing her forehead where he'd made contact. It tingled, just a little, and shifted to the pressure of a headache. She rubbed at it again, the sensation only growing, as if her skin was too small.

Cousland was watching her, head tilted in curiosity. He looked on the verge of saying something.

Trinne shook off the discomfort. "Forward's probably this way..." She pointed toward the door at the far end of the room.

"Trinne." He was still watching her.

Was she cross-eyed? It felt a little like she was cross-eyed. "Mm?"

"Did it...?" the question trailed off uncertainly, as if he wasn't sure how to word it.

"It's fine, Cousland," she tried to wave him off. "Just kinda--"

"Tingly?" He raised an eyebrow at her expression, so it must have been a giveaway. "That's what happened with the rat."

"Well, how'd you make it stop?"

Cousland shrugged. "Changed. The first time was an accident, but after I did it deliberately a few times"—he rubbed the back of his neck absently—"the tingling feeling, the pressure, wasn't so bad."

"So I just gotta.... let myself change?" Trinne rubbed one arm hard as the feeling of too-small skin
got worse. "An' it'll get better?"

Another shrug. "That's what worked for me, anyway."

She sighed, rolled her shoulders uncomfortably, huffed her bangs out of her eyes. "Can't hurt to try, I guess." She shifted her weight from foot to foot and concentrated on letting the sensation spread as Harvey occupied himself poking into the corners of the room(almost as if trying to give her some privacy to figure this out, which she appreciated).

It took a few seconds for anything to happen, and Trinne almost gave up. But there was one thread, buried in the middle of the pressure, heavy and strong, and she latched on to that.

Come on, come on. It blossomed under the attention and grew rapidly. Trinne closed her eyes and concentrated even harder. She accepted the feeling her skin was too small, that she needed to be bigger, and felt something take hold and spread. The tingling ache in her head was gone. And she heard Cousland, from whatever corner he'd been exploring, let out a surprised (impressed?) "Huh." Clearly whatever was going to happen had happened. She opened her eyes.

To find she was now eight feet tall and made of bulky stone. Trinne looked herself over, vaguely registered the grind of stone on stone as she moved. Yep. She was a golem. Trinne experimentally stomped each foot—which made the room shake, rolled her shoulders, and curled one hand into a fist to pound against the other palm.

"Oh, this might even be better," she gloated, before looking down(that was new) at Cousland. "I assume to go back I just think me thoughts?"

He nodded, walking a slow circle around her and taking in the details of the golem form. "That's what I did. Took some focusing at first, but the more you do it, the easier it gets."

Made sense. His slow, inquisitive examination didn't, entirely. "Cousland, what're you doing?"

"Nothing." He paused, as if caught doing something inappropriate. Which he might've actually thought was the case, because it took him a moment to elaborate. "If we have to fight any more golems, and you change, I want to know which one's on my side."

"Oh. Good plan. Find anything that makes me special?" she teased.

He finished his loop and nodded. "Assuming the rest are like these" --he gestured toward the defeated golems--"their... enchantments? are pale blue, almost like lyrium. You have three orange glyphs or runes on something on your back, where your spine would be if golems had them." He cocked his head. "I think your shoulders aren't as wide, either, but that would be hard to pick up on mid-fight."

"Huh." She wondered if the glyphs' color had to do with her other form. But that wasn't really important in the scheme of things, he probably didn't know any more than she did, and she had other questions she'd much rather ask. "So, how much practice have you gotten at switching that you can do it easy as battin' an eye?"

"Enough," Harvey said vaguely. "Remember, it took me a while to find you."

"Right." Trinne turned ponderously(okay, so there was a downside to this) looking for the exit again. "Speaking of, don't you think we should try to free Wynne again? And find Alistair?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "It makes more sense to finish up here first, doesn't it?"
Maker, why are you trying so hard to avoid this? "I guess so, if it's fast." She looked at the door and (internally, at least) grinned as an idea occurred to her. She held out one arm to stop Harvey as he started heading in that direction. "Hold on, I wanna try something."

He stopped and waited expectantly. Trinne eyed the distance from them to the door, a simple stone thing like most of the doors they'd encountered. It would still serve her purpose.

She bent over(also awkward, so it was moving in general that was slower. Good to know), dug her fingers into the ground like she'd seen the other golem do, and ripped up a chunk. She hurled the boulder at the door and was gratified when both it and the surrounding wall shattered. Trinne took two lumbering strides toward the new hole and focused long enough to be herself again, smirking in satisfaction. "That worked better than I expected."

Harvey raised an eyebrow. "Still a bit excessive, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but now I know a way through that damn door in the burning place. Not like it matters what we do to anything here, anyway. None of it's real." She crossed the rest of the distance and peered into the hallway. "Oh, goody. Another door. C'mon, Cousland."

He followed her wordlessly into the hall and down the short distance to the next door. His hands rested on his dagger hilts as Trinne reached to open the door, and she almost voiced the 'Paranoid much?' that popped into her head. But he had been wandering here longer than she had. And this place, with the insane mages lurking in almost every room, deserved a bit of paranoia.

Opening the door was greeted by the rattling hiss of an abomination, further justifying his caution.

"Ah! More have come for Slavren to play with!" it crowed as it charged forward. "Master Sloth is most generous!"

Trinne and Cousland both cursed under their breath as they dodged around it, further into the room. Slavren screeched angrily and wheeled to give chase.

"Think you can distract it for a second?" Trinne asked breathlessly.

"If all you really need's a second, " Cousland shot back as he drew his daggers.

"Okay, maybe three," she conceded, and he gave her a look that said he had a guess what she was planning to do.

One side of his mouth curled in a half-smile. "I can do you one better." With that cryptic comment, he was heading toward Slavren. He ducked the demon's first angry swipe, almost dodged the second. Trinne couldn't help but wince in sympathy when the claws raked across the side of his face.

Focus, Trinne, a little voice scolded. He's buying you time, remember?

Right. This transformation was indeed easier, and she was a golem when Harvey wheeled with the momentum of the demon's blow and threw out one hand to graze its flank.

Slavren turned to ice under his touch. Trinne didn't hesitate to send a floor-boulder careening toward the frozen demon.

"Move!" she bellowed, but it was unnecessary and Cousland was already lunging away from the Slavren-cicle. Just in time; the frozen demon was shattered into a thousand pieces half a heartbeat later, the fragments skittering across the floor.
With a gasp of combined triumph and relief, Trinne shifted back to herself. She couldn't have stopped her smug smile if she'd wanted to (and she didn't). But first things first. "How bad did it get you?" she asked Harvey, striding rapidly across the distance between them.

He smeared blood off his cheek and half winced as he looked at the crimson coating his fingers. "I mean, I've had worse, but-"

"Yeah, considering what I know at least some of those 'worse' things are, you'll hafta forgive me if that doesn't tell me much," Trinne snarked, repressing a shudder as an ogre's roar echoed in her mind. (It almost felt silly how strongly that lingered; after all, she wasn't the one who'd been crushed to what-should-have-been-death. Would have been without Flemeth, because Trinne herself wasn't good enough.) "Sorry," she mumbled, upon realizing Harvey had fallen silent. "I didn't mean..."

"It's not..." The words trailed off and he shook his head. "I mean, they hurt, but I think they're pretty shallow."

"Right. Lemme see." She used her thumb to tip his chin to the side for a better look and had to concur. Freely as they were bleeding, the gashes across his forehead and cheek were nowhere near the worst such monsters could inflict. Definitely within her skill to heal, especially with the extra power boost of being in the Fade. "This'll just take a second."

He flinched just a little as she trailed her fingers up the side of his face. "That was good thinking, by the way."

"What, the boulder? Thanks. You made it work beyond my wildest dreams." Trinne snorted at the unintentional pun and caught his lips twitching toward a smile as well. "So that was even better thinking." She hesitated, but was curious enough she had to ask. "Does that... ice stuff just keep building? It seems to refresh awfully fast."

Cousland nodded as she finished and stepped back. "Slowly, but yes. And thank you."

"Oh. No problem, you're welcome." Trinne caught and twirled a lock of hair as she surveyed the room. "Now, how do we get out of here?" There weren't any of the pillars, or even the font thing, that had previously served as portals. Not that she could see, at least. She was on the verge of wondering if she'd need to throw a boulder through the wall again when Cousland squinted at one of the corners. "One of those doors?" she asked hopefully.

He nodded. "It's right in the corner."

Both of them instinctively reached for the other's hand as they walked toward what looked to Trinne like a blank wall. She thought, for a second, that she saw something shimmer when Harvey's hand curled around hers. But there was nothing when she looked more closely.

On faith it is, then, she thought, suppressing a wry chuckle at how easy it had become for her to take Harvey Cousland on faith. His hand wasn't so cold this time. Trinne wasn't sure if that meant she should worry more or less. It was good the cold wasn't always so bad, but now she had a comparison for when it got worse. However, by the time she'd mulled over that chain of thought, they'd passed through the door to an unfamiliar hallway and he was letting go anyway. He's a big boy, Trinne. He doesn't need you worrying about him at all, she told herself before ruffling a hand through her hair and examining their new surroundings.

Grimy was the first word that sprang to mind. Followed closely by dreary and dim. . Makeshift torches were visible every so often--most lit--but there weren't nearly enough. It almost
reminded her of that tower back at Ostagar, complete with the humming noise in the background. "You take me to so many lovely places, Cousland," she said glibly, glancing over at his lack of a comeback. "You okay?"

He pulled in a deep breath and exhaled it, then rubbed the back of his neck. "We can get to Wynne from here."

"But...?" Trinne prompted. He wouldn't look like he wanted to throw up if there wasn't a but of some kind.

"The way to her is guarded," he said uneasily.

"By what?" Maker, it was like pulling teeth, and she only had so much patience.

Cousland shifted his weight from foot to foot and flaked off some of the frost filming over his gloves. "An ogre."

Trinne's burgeoning impatience vanished. She could give him some grace there, considering. "Oh. All by itself?"

He nodded and took another deep breath. "Now it is. I took care of the rest."

"By yourself? Damn, Cousland, I'm impressed."

He sort of half-shrugged, still staring down the hallway. "It's easier to sneak up on people as a rat."

"Still..." From what she could tell, this place wasn't small. "Good job." That didn't feel adequate, but it was Cousland, and there was a fine line between compliments and flirting, which she certainly wasn't going to do with him. "So, which way?"

"Um..." He hesitated and Trinne prayed it was just to get his bearings, not because he'd forgotten or the place had changed. Fortunately that proved to be the case; after a few moments looking around, he pointed off to their left. "That way."

They made their way down the hall cautiously, despite the lack of obvious danger. Both had learned not to let their guard down here, even in a space that should be clear of enemies. Cousland led the way through the various turns(why was everything like a maze, anyway?) and Trinne settled a couple paces behind him. She kept a tally running in her head of every darkspawn corpse they passed, and by the time they halted outside the large, central doorway she had to admit her respect for Harvey Cousland had risen several notches. Okay, okay, Duncan may have been right about you.

Mage and rogue were both careful to keep out of sight as they peered into the chamber. Trinne had to suppress the urge to whistle at the size of the ogre standing guard in front of the large shimmering mirror she assumed led to Wynne.

She ducked back, tugging Cousland's arm so he'd follow, and hissed, "That's a soddin' big sonovabitch. How'd you get past it before?"

Harvey shifted and his gaze slid off to the side. "It... walked away and I snuck in before it got back."

"And how'd you avoid it comin' out?"

He shifted even more uneasily, crossing his arms as if to protect himself, gaze briefly meeting hers before darting back to study the wall. "I didn't."
"Oh." Trinne ran one hand through her hair, reading the volumes he didn't say in those two words. Half-joking to lighten the mood and half earnest curiosity, she arched an eyebrow and asked. "Maker, Cousland, why do ogres soddin' hate you so much?"

He snorted softly and leaned back to peek in the room again. "Damned if I know."

"Well, we gotta take care of it if we wanna get to Wynne," she sighed, then winked. "Don't worry, I'll protect you."

"I feel safer already," he said dryly. She took a moment's focus to shift into the golem. "You should." Not waiting for either a reply or a plan, she lumbered into the room.

The ogre immediately straightened and swung toward her. Before it had a chance to react to the new threat, Trinne hauled back and punched it in the face as hard as she could. It reeled away with a roar of pain, but gathered itself quickly and rammed its head into her chest.

While not as devastating against an eight foot tall stone golem as a similar move had been against Alistair, it did still stagger her. Trinne stumbled back a step, recentered herself, and swung at it again. This time she missed. The ogre's return blow caught her shoulder and she growled in frustration. This form was much slower, even if it did pack a wallop, so dodging was a challenge.

But that went both ways. She punched at the ogre twice more, one blow connecting with its jaw and the other its chest. It almost fell before catching its balance.

_Damn it, go down!_ Trinne pressed her advantage and punched it again, this time in the neck.

The ogre went reeling and crashed into the wall.

As she took a moment to plan her next move--and wonder where Cousland was--she felt a vague weight on her shoulder.

"Trinne." Well, that answered one question. He was a rat again. "Get it to chase you."

She turned as much as she could to look at him. "Are you planning what I think you're planning?"

"Worked before, didn't it?" he retorted, and retreated with a flick of his tail.

Trinne stood still until she was sure he'd gotten away. The ogre hadn't finished dragging itself out of the wall; she could take a minute to avoid the risk of accidentally stepping on him. (That would be awkward.) Once she was sure he was safely away, she reached down and yanked up a piece of the floor to hurl at the ogre.

She caught it just as it got free and almost knocked it back into the hole. Now well and truly pissed, the ogre bellowed and lurched toward her. Trinne backed up, staying just out of reach.

_C'mon, c'mon, c'mon_, she urged mentally, afraid Cousland would wait too long and the ogre would see him. She really didn't want to repeat the Tower of Ishal.

Just before she reached the point of saying something aloud, Cousland materialized a few feet from the doorway and ice slicked the ground between her and the charging ogre.

It worked like a charm, even better than with the golems. The ogre's feet went out from under it by the second step on ice, its head cracked audibly against the floor, and the stunned beast skidded to a
halt just past Trinne.

Smirking internally, she lumbered across the short distance and stomped down on the ogre's chest with a massive stone foot. It howled in pain and rage as ribs snapped, shoving viciously upright to attempt pummeling blows in retaliation. The first one went wide, the second connected, leaving Trinne briefly dazed, and the third one she caught, stone fingers wrapped around the huge, meaty fist. She swung at it with her free hand, but the ogre mirrored her reaction and caught the incoming punch. The two of them stood frozen, locked in a straining grapple. Trinne grunted with exertion as she tried to push it toward the wall, heard the ogre's pained breaths chuffing past its fangs, scrambled to come up with a next move.

That was when she caught sight of Cousland. She'd lost him, briefly, in the flurry of traded blows, but she could see him now. He was sprinting past her and the ogre, heading for the wall behind them. He took a running leap and shifted into the rat before he hit the wall. Slipped slightly, caught himself, then used that form's even greater agility to scramble higher up and launch himself at the ogre. He shifted back as he landed in its shoulder, one hand scrabbling for purchase as the other plunged a dagger into the side of the beast's neck.

The ogre roared and one hand instinctively jerked back to find this new source of pain and get it off. But it withdrawing one hand meant Trinne also had one free. She hauled back and punched it even harder than her opening blow. It staggered, the momentum dislodging Cousland from his perch. He landed on his feet but off-balance, skittering back a few steps to avoid the ogre's clumsy groping swings. It was hurting now, badly, and they needed to finish it off. Cousland caught his balance and charged back in, dropping low to slide between the ogre's legs and slash open its knee.

It bellowed and tried to kick at him, but Trinne punched it in the chest while it was off-balance and it teetered backwards instead. Leave him alone! An old memory rose up, scrapping in the dormitory, no magic, just wildly flailing fists and wordless screams because he was all she had and they wouldn't leave him alone. The scenarios may have been different, the stakes far higher now, but the ferocious urge to protect was the same. The emotions surged and Trinne let out a yell as she pounded her fist into the side of the ogre's face again. It went down the the sound of snapping bone and the quieter clatter of skittering teeth on stone.

This time it didn't get back up, just let out one last hissing, gargled breath before laying still.

Shifting back to herself was even easier this time. "Well, that went a lot better than I expected."

Cousland nodded as he retrieved his dagger from the side of the thing's neck. "Same. Especially since we didn't have a plan going in."

"Makin' it up on the fly worked this time," Trinne said breezily, turning toward the mirror.

"We won't always be so lucky," Cousland muttered behind her, but he didn't press the issue, and there wasn't any real censure in his tone. It was just an observation, so Trinne ignored it.

She gestured toward the mirror. "So, we just... go?"

He nodded. "Basically. Walk right in and we'll end up with Wynne."

Trinne pretended not to notice how ill at ease he looked, though it did make her wonder how badly he'd screwed up last time. "Let's get this over with this."

She stepped into the glowing white portal, only vaguely noticing that, despite his reluctance, Harvey did follow.
As with all the various methods of Fade travel they'd discovered, it only took a few seconds for the swirling, glowing white mist to dissipate and reveal they were on an island. Its gently rolling surface reminded Trinne of hers once the illusion had faded. It wasn't a large island, so it didn't take more than a quick look around to locate Wynne.

Before approaching the older mage, however, Trinne turned to Cousland. "So, when you say you were less persuasive with her, what exactly happened?"

He cleared his throat and glanced toward Wynne. "Her... illusion, nightmare, whatever you want to call it, has her convinced everyone in the tower is dead and she failed to protect them."

"Morbid." Trinne shuddered and crossed her arms. "Think I prefer mine." A thought occurred and she shot him a curious look. "What was yours, by the way?"

"Huh?"

"Your... nightmare. You mentioned it took a bit to see through yours when you were helping with mine. So what'd it give you?"

Cousland's face went guarded and he hunched his shoulders. "A lot like yours, actually. I was back with my family. Had to realize I couldn't be back with them, because..."

Trinne winced. "Sorry. Shouldn't have asked."

He shrugged. "Fair's fair. I got to see yours."

_Yeah, but my family's still alive. Much as I miss 'em, it's not the same._ She knew enough not to say it, instead turning back to the matter at hand. "So. Any tips for handling hers?"

"Going from my experience? Don't try to rush her, and you'll have to be persuasive."

"Oh, is that all I have to do? Because I'm such a patient person."

He shrugged again, fiddling with his daggers. "At least you're good at arguing."

She squinted suspiciously. "Is that a compliment or an insult, Cousland?"

"Right now? Compliment." The implication that at some later date it might _not_ be was impossible to miss. "And it's a skill you'll need."

"Great." Well, no point in delaying any longer. Trinne sighed and cracked her knuckles as she walked toward Wynne.

Before she could say a word, Wynne's head snapped in her direction and her eyes narrowed. "You. Where were you? Why didn't you help stop... all this?!" She spread her hands in a gesture toward the ground. "This was your home as well. Don't you care?!"

Trinne looked down, saw the "corpses", all clad in apprentice blue. "Hard to feel sympathy for demons." The words were out before she could stop them. Wynne straightened indignantly and she heard Cousland suck in a sharp breath. Not the best start, but the accusations had thrown her off, made her bristle.

"How dare you," Wynne snapped. "I know you couldn't wait to get out of here, but your blatant disregard for the lives of your fellow apprentices is... is appalling!"
Trinne sighed. "No, what I meant... Do you remember what happened? How you got here?" She wasn't sure where 'here' was beyond still being the Circle; all she could see was the supposedly dead mages. "Did you see them die?"

Wynne scowled. "What is the point of such a question? Why would you ask me to recall that?"

"Because it's important," Trinne said levelly. "Just try to remember what happened, what we were doing."

"Oh, very well," the older mage huffed. She tilted her head in thought, her lingering frown fading as she tried to concentrate. "That's odd. I remember... entering the tower, fighting demons, but everything else is... hazy...."

"Because that's all that's happened," Trinne explained. "We're still saving the Circle, Wynne. They haven't died yet. We were trapped in the Fade by a Sloth demon."

"Then how..." She looked helplessly at the fallen apprentices. Trinne couldn't really blame her; Wynne had always been fiercely protective of the Circle, and a couple of the "dead" were younger, not much more than children. No wonder it was hard to shake free of the emotions the sight brought. "They are here, dead, but I don't remember them dying."

"Because they didn't," Trinne repeated, feeling the first tickle of irritation. *Understanding* didn't mean she wanted to spend forever going in circles. Not when they still needed to find Alistair and had more demons to kill before they could even get to Sloth.

Wynne rubbed her forehead. "You... have no reason to lie, but my thoughts feel... cloudy. Perhaps I need some time away from this place, to clear my mind."

"Yes! "That sounds like a good idea," Trinne said, trying not to sound too eager, in case that would make her suspicious somehow.

Even as Wynne moved to join her and Harvey, one of the corpses stirred. The slender, dark-haired elf rolled over, his fingers clutching at the hem of Wynne's robes.

"Don't leave us!" he pleaded. "We don't want to be alone!"

"Holy Maker!" Wynne recoiled from his touch.

*Shoulda seen this coming.* Trinne groaned. "Told you this wasn't real." She reached for her staff, saw Cousland's hands go to his daggers.

The elf pushed to his feet and held out one hand. "Stay, Wynne. Don't fight it. You belong here, with us."

She hesitated for the barest moment, as if shaken by his words, before shaking her head. "No. My task is not yet done. It is not my time. Not yet."

"No, you must come." This from a mousy-haired human girl as she stepped into view.

"Come away to your rest," added a dark-haired man, getting to his feet as well.

"She said no," Trinne retorted, and flung a stonefist at the man. He looked almost like Kinnon, but not quite. As if the demon responsible had pulled an appearance from Wynne's memory in too much of a rush to get the details right. The stonefist hit his chest and sent him crashing back into the rocky pillar behind him.
Cousland made short work of the elf, dodging an arcane bolt to get in close enough he could slit the
demon's throat. Wynne froze the girl with an ice spell, then quickly summoned a stonefist to shatter
her.

Trinne conjured a lightning bolt to make absolutely sure almost-Kinnon was dead, then looked
around to make sure there weren't any more demons emerging from the ether or the floor or
something. It looked like just the three. She was intensely grateful for the more even odds than her
nightmare had given them, but this almost felt too easy. She didn't relax until both Wynne and
Cousland had as well.

"See? Demons." Trinne slung her staff on her back and raked one hand through her hair.

Wynne nodded somberly. "You were right. Thank the Maker you came along, both of y-" Even as
she turned to acknowledge Cousland, she frowned in confusion. "Wait, no, where are you going?"
Right before their eyes, she shimmered, flickered, and faded from view. Abrupt and disconcerting as
her departure was, it did help a couple pieces click in Trinne's head.

"Is that what happened with me, after mine?" She gestured toward the empty space.

Cousland nodded as he sheathed his daggers. "Started to, yes. But it wasn't as fast, so I had time to--"

"Catch me?" she finished for him. "Thanks again for that, by the way."

Another nod, this one accompanied by a faint smile. "You're welcome. I told you; I didn't want to do
this alone."

She snorted. "And given that big horny bastard we just took down, can't really blame you for that.
So, what now? Should we just keep going, since I can break that door in the burning area now?" *I
think.*

Harvey shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. "Might as well. Unless you think there's anything
helpful Niall could tell us?"

Trinne shook her head. "He's not the type to hold things back. Anything he knows that would help
he's already told us. No point in going back."

"Alright, then, might as well keep going."

They looked around until they found the necessary four-sided pillar and pressed into one of the
panels until purple mist gave way to familiar dancing flames.

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